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JEREMIAH

PROPHET OF COURAGE AND HOPE

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J. Philip Hyatt

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JEREMIAH: PROPHET OF COURAGE AND HOPE

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P R E F A C E

JEREMIAH SHOULD BE ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN PERSONALITIES in the Old Testament. The book bearing his name contains more authentic material from and concerning this prophet than we have for any other Old Testament personality. King David is perhaps the closest rival in this respect. The book of Jeremiah contains not only a large number of messages of the prophet, but also very valuable biographical details concerning him, and the highly revealing "Confessions of Jeremiah." Thus the modern reader is in position to obtain a clearer and more complete impression of the life, character, and message of the prophet of Anathoth than he can of any other person in the Old Testament.

In spite of this, Jeremiah is in fact the object of very widespread, serious misunderstanding. He is popularly known as "the weeping prophet," in part because of the attribution to him of the book of Lamentations (which he certainly did not write!), and in part because of passages such as 9:1. It is true that Jeremiah did on occasion weep; but so also did Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 19:41; John 11:35). Sometimes Jeremiah wept for himself, but more often he, like Jesus, mourned over the sufferings and sins of others with whom he so completely identified himself.

It is an injustice to Jeremiah—and to ourselves—to consider this prophet only as "the weeping prophet," or as a forbidding

figure. He was in fact a warm personality, and was usually "a fortified wall of bronze" (15:20), standing up against heavy opposition to serve as a representative to God before his fellow men. Tenderness of feeling, courage, and hope characterized his life far more than despair or pessimism.

The purpose of the following pages is to help one to read the book of Jeremiah intelligently and profitably, and thus to make the acquaintance of one of the most important characters in the Bible. It must be admitted that his book is not easy to read. This arises partly from the arrangement of materials in the book, or the seeming absence of logical arrangement at many points. It arises in part also from the fact that Jeremiah was closely concerned with historic events; in order to understand this prophet, one must know the history of the times in which he lived. The reading of the book of Jeremiah should be facilitated by use of Appendix I, which gives a suggested-chronological sequence for the materials in the book.

The reader who wishes to undertake a more thorough study is directed to the treatment in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V (Abingdon Press, 1956). In the Introduction and Exegesis of Jeremiah in that volume, I have given some of the detailed evidence for the views adopted in the present study.

The material in Chapters VI-IX, in somewhat different form, was delivered as the McFadin Lectures at Texas Christian University in January, 1954.

J. PHILIP HYATT

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CHAPTER I

WHAT WAS A PROPHET?

THE WORD “PROPHET” OCCURS OFTEN IN POPULAR SPEECH to designate a person who predicts the future. Thus we speak of weather prophets, political prophets, football prophets, and the like.

It has become a commonplace of the modern view of the Old Testament that the Hebrew prophets were not primarily men of this type. The Old Testament prophet was primarily *a spokesman for God to the people of his own time*, denouncing them for their sins, pleading with them to return to God, and encouraging them to follow the will of God in all phases of their life.

The ordinary Hebrew word for prophet, *nābiî* (pronounced *nah-veé*), sometimes literally means “spokesman.” For example, in Exod. 7:1, when God was instructing Moses to go before the Pharaoh of Egypt to demand the release of the Hebrews from bondage, he said to Moses: “See, I make you as a god in relation to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your spokesman (*nābiî*).”¹ This means that Aaron is to be the spokesman for Moses in his dealings with Pharaoh; Moses will tell Aaron what to say, and Aaron will carry out the instructions of his brother, speaking what he is told to speak. In a parallel passage in Exod. 4:15-16, Yahweh says to Moses

¹ Author’s translation.

regarding Aaron: "You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. . . . He shall speak for you to the people; and he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God."

Just as Aaron could serve as the spokesman or mouthpiece for Moses, so the Hebrew prophet served as the mouthpiece for God, speaking God's words rather than his own. This is expressed vividly in Jer. 15:19, in which Yahweh says to Jeremiah:

If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.
They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.

The Hebrew prophet who was faithful to his office thus felt that he was deputized to speak on behalf of God. What a noble and important and often difficult task that was! Even the faithful prophet might sometimes stumble and fall short of the full will of God, but he was conscious of being used by God to deliver God's message rather than his own. When Jeremiah condemned the unfaithful prophets of his time, he said contemptuously of them that "they speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord" (23:16). He accuses them of stealing God's words from one another (23:30), rather than seeking to stand "in the council of the Lord" and thus receive the Lord's word directly from him (23:18, 22).

This definition of the Hebrew prophet as a spokesman for God emphasizes the fact that he was primarily a *speaker* rather than a writer. He spoke God's words to people living in his own day. Because we must study the prophets from "books" of the Old Testament, we are inclined to think of

them as authors, calmly sitting in their studies and writing out their books. This is certainly not a correct view for most of the prophets, though a few of them (such as the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile called Second Isaiah) may have written their messages without speaking them, or may have delivered some of their messages in writing. Prophets such as Jeremiah, Amos, and Isaiah surely delivered their messages orally; they may have spoken far more than has been preserved in their books.

You must try to visualize a Hebrew prophet as standing up and preaching "the word of the Lord" to his fellow countrymen, as they were gathered in the temple courtyard, the open square near a city gate, in the market place, or elsewhere. The prophets were not pastors who had to prepare and deliver sermons every Sunday morning at eleven o'clock; their messages were not as long as the modern pastor's sermons, and were not delivered with such regularity. The prophet's messages were occasional—that is, delivered on important occasions when they felt that the situation demanded a word from God. Sometimes the prophet's message was very brief, occupying only a few minutes; some occasions may have called for longer messages, but it is unlikely that a prophet ever spoke for more than thirty minutes at a time.

Little is known regarding the actual method by which the prophets' oral messages came to be written down in the form in which we now have them. We shall see that Jeremiah (ch. 36) at one time dictated to his secretary Baruch the messages he had delivered over a space of many years (see pages 37-38). Prophets may have spoken from "notes" written on ostraca (pieces of broken pottery) or on papyrus. In some cases they may have collected and preserved some of their own messages,

but it is more probable that the task of preservation and collection was performed by disciples or followers. Each of the larger prophetic books went through a long process of collection, revision, and editing before it was considered to be part of the canon of Scripture.

The fact that the prophets were primarily speakers rather than writers presents to the modern reader one of his most difficult problems. When the prophetic messages (sometimes referred to as "oracles," though they have little resemblance to the ancient Greek oracles) were collected and edited, little attention was given to chronological order, and to indicating the proper division between messages which had been originally delivered at different times and on different occasions. Sometimes the modern scholar is unable to discover the principle by which the messages of a given prophet were put together. Yet, in order to study a particular prophet intelligently we must try to separate his individual messages, assign them where possible to specific occasions and dates, and put them into chronological order. To aid in the detailed study of the whole book of Jeremiah, Appendix I lists all the messages of the book arranged in what I believe to be their chronological order.

Intercessor Before God

In addition to being a spokesman for God to the people of his own day, the Hebrew prophet was often *an intercessor before God on behalf of his fellow men*. This aspect of the prophet's role is often overlooked, for we are inclined to think only of the priest as being an intercessor.

The first person to be called a prophet in the Old Testament is Abraham, in a narrative in Gen. 20 which comes to us from

the writer whom we call the Elohist. Abraham went to Gerar and there, in order to protect his own life, said that Sarah was his sister. She was taken into the harem of Abimelech, the king of Gerar. But that king had a dream in which he was told that Sarah was really Abraham's wife. When the king protested that he had taken her in complete innocence, God said to him: "Now then restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live" (Gen. 20:7). It is quite clear that the author of this narrative conceived of a prophet as an intercessor before the Deity.

Amos had several visions, probably before the time that he began to prophesy publicly. As these are reported in ch. 7 of his book, we see that he twice interceded with Yahweh on behalf of Israel. In his first vision he saw a plague of locusts, and he interceded with God not to destroy the nation with this plague:

O Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!

—Amos 7:2

This time Yahweh repented and said, "It shall not be."

In his second vision Amos saw a great fire which was about to devour the land. Again he interceded:

O Lord God, cease, I beseech thee!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!

—Amos 7:5

A second time Yahweh repented and withheld destruction.

There are other examples of the intercession of Hebrew prophets on behalf of their fellow men, sometimes successful and sometimes not. There were times when a prophet was told that he should not intercede with God, for intercession would be unavailing. Jeremiah was told at one time: "As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I do not hear you" (7:16; cf. 11:14).

Many Prophets Were Poets

The Hebrew prophets were often men of high literary ability, and most of them were poets. We should think of them not as writing poetry, but as speaking in poetic form.

This statement may seem at first glance to be very surprising. If you use the King James Version of the Old Testament, it is difficult to tell from the way it is printed that many passages in the prophetic books are poetry. Yet if you use a modern version, such as the Revised Standard Version or Moffatt's translation, you will immediately see that a large portion of these books is printed as poetry rather than as prose. At least two-fifths of the literature of the Old Testament is poetry, and it is so printed in the Revised Standard Version.

This fact is important for understanding and interpreting the prophets. Poetry should not be read and interpreted in the same manner as prose. Poetry is usually written with vivid imagination and deep feeling and should be read with these qualities. The words of the prophets abound in vivid figures of speech; we should attempt to appreciate the significance of those figures and not interpret them with literalness. The diction of poetry is different from that of prose, being more

majestic and noble, often with imaginative suggestiveness rather than plain statement, and with strong emotion rather than strict logic. Many modern readers are led into errors of interpretation by reading vivid Oriental poetry as if it were Western prose.

Hebrew poetry has its own characteristics, some of them being the same as those of English poetry and some being different. It may be helpful in the reading of the prophets for us to note briefly some of those characteristics.

Hebrew poetry does not have rhyme (except by accident), but it does have rhythm or meter. The rhythm is secured by regularity of the accented syllables in a line, the number of unaccented syllables being irregular. The most frequent type of poetry has three accented syllables to the line.

One of the most striking features of Hebrew poetry is "parallelism of members," which involves a balancing of both sound and meaning in adjacent lines. The most complete type of parallelism is *synonymous*, in which the second line repeats the thought of the first line in synonymous words. An example is Jer. 1:5:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you.

Note that the second line repeats the idea of the first, in words that are different but synonymous. Complete parallelism such as this is somewhat rare; partial parallelism occurs frequently.

Other types of parallelism are (*a*) *antithetic*, in which the second line contains a thought opposite from the first (a frequent type in Proverbs, where the wise and the foolish

are often contrasted); (b) *climactic*, in which the second line partly repeats and partly goes beyond the first line (see Ps. 29 for several examples); and (c) *synthetic*, in which the second line completes the thought of the first, as in English "free verse" (see Jer. 3:1 as an example).

Hebrew poetry is organized into units of increasing size: verses (two-line couplets predominate, but larger units occur), strophes, stanzas, and complete poems. In reading the Revised Standard Version, note that the indentation of lines indicates poetic verses, which are frequently not identical with the numbered verses of the chapters; and that blank spaces separate strophes.²

The Prophets' Use of Dramatic Symbols

The prophets sought in many different ways to convey their message to the people. We have been emphasizing the point that they spoke for God to the people, and for the people to God. They also *acted* their messages. Of course the faithful prophets were men of exemplary conduct and character, and they sought to be true to God in their lives as well as in their words. But they went further and often used dramatic symbols to impress their fellow men. Thus Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot for three years to proclaim to the citizens of Judah that if they participated in the rebellion against Assyria, they would become slaves, naked and barefoot as he was (Isa. 20). On this occasion the symbolic action was successful, for both the biblical and Assyrian

² For an excellent brief discussion of Hebrew poetry, see James Muilenburg, "The Poetry of the Old Testament," *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1952), pp. 62-70. The subject is usually treated in commentaries on the Psalms.

records indicate that Judah did not actively participate in the rebellion led by Ashdod.

Jeremiah once made a yoke and put it on his neck, to symbolize to Judah and the surrounding nations that it was God's will that they should submit to the yoke of Babylonia (27:1-15). Many symbolic actions are reported in the book of Ezekiel. Some of the prophets gave their children symbolic names which made of them "walking sermons." Thus Isaiah had a son named Shearjashub, "A remnant shall return" (Isa. 7:3), and one of Hosea's children was named Lo-ammi, "[You are] not my people" (Hos. 1:9).

The use of such dramatic symbols indicates how seriously the prophets attempted to communicate God's word to the people, and how completely they dedicated their lives to his service. Even more, they sought through such dramatic symbols, in accordance with Hebrew ways of thinking, to help create or produce the results which they desired. These actions were not magic, but probably they were thought of as being something more potent than mere symbols.

Were the Great Prophets Ecstatics?

Some of the early prophets of Israel had experiences involving abnormal behavior, for which we often use the term "ecstasy." This term, which is of Greek origin, is not really suitable, since it is more appropriate to Greek conceptions of human nature than to Hebrew; but the term has been widely used and no other is more descriptive.

One of the clearest accounts of an ecstatic experience may be found in I Sam. 10:5-13. Saul had been anointed by Samuel as a prince over Israel. When Saul was about to leave, Samuel told him what would happen: he would come

to Gibeah and there meet a band of prophets coming down from the high place, with various musical instruments. Samuel said to Saul: "Then the spirit of the Lord will come mightily upon you, and you shall prophesy with them and be turned into another man" (10:6). As Samuel had predicted, Saul went and met the band of prophets, "and the spirit of God came mightily upon him, and he prophesied among them" (10:10). We are not told just what Saul did on this occasion, but it was something which surprised the bystanders and caused them to ask: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" On another occasion Saul had an ecstatic experience in which the spirit of God came upon him, and he "stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel, and lay naked all that day and all that night" (I Sam. 19:24).

Ecstatic experiences occurred in pagan religions, most notably among the Canaanites. There is an excellent example of an extreme type of ecstasy among Canaanite priest-prophets in the account of the contest on Mt. Carmel between Elijah and the representatives of Baal (I Kings 18:20-40). When the prophets of Baal sought to call down fire to consume their sacrifice, they went to great extremes. They danced about the altar and cried out unto Baal, and then, at the height of their ecstasy, "cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them" (18:28).

These accounts show that ecstatic experiences involved highly emotional behavior of abnormal character. Perhaps they remind the modern reader of the kind of activities that can be seen among some "Holy Rollers," snake handlers, and the like. Though we may be at a loss to see the religious significance of such experiences, the Hebrews interpreted

them as indicating that the spirit or the "hand" of God had come upon the prophet.

Old Testament scholars have often debated the question whether the classical prophets—among whom we number Jeremiah—had ecstatic experiences. Scholars have not reached unanimity of opinion, but a majority seem to believe that the classical prophets did not have ecstatic experiences—at least not in strong measure, and not as regular experiences. It is possible that they did occasionally have ecstatic experiences of a mild type, particularly at the time of their commission to prophesy.

Even if we should accept the view that the great prophets were ecstasies, that would not help us much in understanding them. It could tell us something about the *how*, but not about the *what* and *why* of prophecy. The prophets must be judged by the truth of the content of their prophecies, not by the method of receiving them. A test of the truth of a prophet's message more important than whether he received it in an ecstatic state was whether it harmonized with the character of God as he knew Him.

The Prophets as Foretellers of the Future

At the outset of our discussion of the nature of a prophet, we tried to point out that they were not just foretellers of the future; they were spokesmen for God to their own generation. Yet we must not deny that the prophets often had something to say about the future, as well as about times which had gone by and their own present. The oft-repeated statement that they were forth-tellers rather than fore-tellers is not wholly accurate. The prophets were seldom concerned with the far-distant future, with times not related to their

own. They usually spoke about the future in *conditional terms*, saying that God would punish the people if they continued in sin, but bless them if they repented and turned to him. Thus they usually spoke of the *near* future as it would arise out of conditions of their own time; and they believed that God's treatment of the nation and individuals in it would be determined in part by their actions and their attitude toward him. Their prophecies of the future were not based upon mechanical *foresight*, but rather upon their *insight* into conditions of their time and into the nature of the God they served.

Real Men Dealing with Real Problems

In all our thinking about the prophets, we must remember that they were *real men* speaking to *real people* about *real problems*. They did not live in ivory towers separated from the life of their time, though they did on occasion withdraw from the society of men for meditation and prayer. They were not automatons or puppets in the hand of an arbitrary Deity. God used them as his spokesmen without violating the integrity of their own personalities. He did not choose to send his word to the world through hollow tubes, but through living and struggling men who had dedicated themselves to his service.

The problems with which these prophets dealt were human problems that are of perennial significance. Human nature and the fundamental problems which it must face have changed little since Old Testament days; the problems appear in new guise or in a new framework, but they are not essentially new. That is why the Hebrew prophets still have importance for us and have a message for our day.

An excellent description of the Hebrew prophet has been written by a leading British scholar, H. H. Rowley:

The prophet who is properly so called was a man who knew God in the immediacy of experience, who felt an inescapable constraint to utter what he was profoundly convinced was the word of God, and whose word was at bottom a revelation of the nature of God no less than of His will, who saw the life of men in the light of his vision of God, and who saw the inevitable issue of that life, who therefore declared that issue and pleaded with men to avoid it by the cleansing and renewing of their lives.³

³ *The Servant of the Lord, and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), p. 128.

CHAPTER II

THE TIMES IN WHICH JEREMIAH LIVED

SINCE A PROPHET WAS ONE WHO PROCLAIMED THE MESSAGE of God to the people of his own time, we must have some knowledge of the historical setting of a prophet's life if we want to understand his message. The prophet did not live and prophesy in a vacuum and did not address his words to people living in a far-distant future. If we are to derive benefit for ourselves in studying a prophet, we must study carefully his message for his own day before we can determine whether he has a message for us.

Knowledge of the historical setting is especially important in the case of Jeremiah, for he was involved in the affairs of his time, both national and international, and felt himself bound by strong ties of emotion to his own people and their fortunes.

The era in which Jeremiah lived can without question be called an era of transition and crisis. In time it extended roughly from 625 B.C. to 575 B.C. During this fifty-year period one great empire fell in ruins and another empire rose to dominate the Near East. The prophet's native country, Judah, suffered a sharp decline in its fortunes and finally fell, with its capital city in ruins, many of its people taken captive to a foreign land, and its political independence lost. Jeremiah

lived through these trying days, attempting always to persuade his fellow countrymen and their leaders to live sensibly and wisely according to God's will; after the nation fell he worked to give them new hope, based not on superficial optimism but on sound religious faith.

The Great Empires

When Jeremiah was born, the Assyrian Empire had been the dominant world power for over a hundred years. The Assyrians have been called the "Prussians of the ancient East" because of their warlike nature and their use of frightful cruelty to subdue other nations. They established an empire in the middle of the eighth century B.C.; they soon captured the northern kingdom of Israel, making it an Assyrian province (721 B.C.). The tiny kingdom of Judah kept its political independence only by paying heavy tribute to the Assyrian kings.

In the latter part of the seventh century the Assyrian Empire began to wane, because its manpower was sapped by prolonged wars, there were internal intrigues, and barbarians began to invade from the north. The last strong king was Ashurbanipal (who died about 633 B.C.); his library of cuneiform tablets at Nineveh has been excavated in modern times and has thrown a flood of light on Assyrian history and culture. In 612 B.C. the capital city of Nineveh was captured (the Old Testament book of Nahum contains a song of triumph over its fall), and seven years later the final disastrous defeat of the Assyrians and their Egyptian allies was inflicted at Carchemish, a city in Syria on the Euphrates River (see Jer. 46:2-12).

It was the Babylonians who led the attack on Assyria and

now established a new empire, known as the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire. They took over the lands which had been under Assyrian control. This was the second world empire to be established by the Babylonians, the earlier having been in the time of the great Hammurabi a thousand years earlier. Chaldea was, properly speaking, a state located in the south of Babylonia at the head of the Persian Gulf. The rulers of the Neo-Babylonian Empire came from there, and thus gave their name to it. The most famous and strongest king of the Babylonians was Nebuchadrezzar, who ruled for forty-three years immediately following the battle of Carchemish. His father, Nabopolassar, had led the successful attack on Nineveh. (The name of Nebuchadrezzar appears in the Bible also as Nebuchadnezzar; the former is closer to the form of his name as it appears in the Babylonian language.)

The Babylonians were not as warlike and cruel as the Assyrians; they were more given to the arts of peace and were kinder in treating captive peoples. Nebuchadnezzar promoted trade and industry and devoted much energy to rebuilding Babylon, which he made into one of the most magnificent cities of the ancient world. He built the "Hanging Gardens of Babylon," one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; they are believed to have been built for his wife who missed the hills of her native Media on the plain of Babylon. He also built many temples.

History of Judah

The little kingdom of Judah in Palestine was unavoidably influenced by these international events. The whole of Palestine is no larger than the state of Vermont, and the Hebrews could never hope to be an important world power. Yet they

were unfortunately situated in a position where they could not escape being a pawn or a marching ground between the great nations. They were located on the corridor between the lands of Mesopotamia to the northeast and Egypt to the southwest. Caught in the struggle between the great nations, Hebrew kings sided now with one and now with another, and eventually met their destruction by an alliance with the weaker power.

We must review briefly the reigns of five kings who ruled Judah during this tragic period of her decline and fall, as background for our study of the life of Jeremiah.

Josiah was probably on the throne of Judah when Jeremiah was born. He had come to the throne in 640 B.C. at the age of only eight. Nothing is known of the early years of his rule, when the kingdom must have been actually under the control of regents. In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign a series of very significant religious reforms took place, of which the record may be found in II Kings 22:3-23:25. These reforms were based upon a "book of the law" found in the Jerusalem temple; in the opinion of most Old Testament scholars, that book was the book of Deuteronomy or a large portion of it.

King Josiah sought to purify the worship of the Hebrews by getting rid of the objects and practices which had been borrowed from pagan religions, especially from the Assyrians and from the old religion of the Canaanites. He centralized all sacrificial worship of Yahweh in the Jerusalem temple, abolishing the local sanctuaries throughout the land where sacrifices had previously been offered. If Deuteronomy formed the basis of his reforms, he must also have undertaken to establish the prophetic principles of justice and honesty in the

life of the people by giving royal approval to the laws which are found in Deuteronomy.

Josiah's reforms had an important political aspect. Since Assyrian power was now weak, he extended his control over cities of the north which had been part of the Assyrian province of Samaria. The centralization of worship in Jerusalem promoted the centralizing of political control there.

Josiah reigned for thirteen years after instituting these far-reaching reforms, and then met his death in a conflict with the Pharaoh of Egypt. That ruler, whose name was Neco, set out with his army on a march to the Euphrates River to give aid to the king of Assyria and had to pass through the land of Palestine. King Josiah came up to meet him at Megiddo; whether he actually attacked the Egyptian Pharaoh, or only went to have a "diplomatic conference" with him, we do not know. In any event the Judean king was put to death by the Pharaoh, and his body was carried back to Jerusalem. Josiah had been one of the best kings of Judah, but the fact that he was killed by a foreign enemy may have been considered by many Hebrews as an expression of divine disfavor upon himself and the reforms he had tried to put into effect.

Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, was made king by popular acclamation but reigned for only three months. When the Egyptians returned from their expedition into Mesopotamia, they placed on the throne another son of Josiah, Jehoiakim, who they believed would be more pliable in their hands.

Jehoiakim (609-598 b.c.) was not at all like his father. He drew upon himself the strongest condemnation Jeremiah ever uttered against a Judean king (22:13-19). He was proud and pompous, more interested in the size and beauty of his palace than in justice and righteousness. He probably ignored many

of the religious reforms instituted by his father, allowing the people to revert to pagan practices. Since he owed his position to the Egyptians he must have been loyal to them for a few years, until the battle of Carchemish proved the weakness of the Egyptians and the strength of Babylonia. Then he transferred his loyalty to the Babylonians. His subsequent vacillation between Babylonia and Egypt brought on two invasions of Judah: in 602 b.c. marauding bands of Chaldeans and others entered the land; and four years later a formal invasion took place, and Jerusalem was placed under siege. King Jehoiakim died immediately before or during the siege and was succeeded for a brief period by his son Jehoachin.

The new king surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Then the king himself and many of the Jews were taken into exile in Babylonia. The king was kept in prison throughout the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and then was released from prison and given a place of privilege at the royal court by his successor, Awel-Marduk, or Evil-merodach, as he is known in the Bible (Jer. 52:31-34).

The Babylonians placed in the kingship a third son of Josiah, Zedekiah (597-587 b.c.). His personality was quite different from that of his brother, King Jehoiakim. Zedekiah was sympathetic toward Jeremiah and wanted to follow his advice. His ideals were apparently good, but he lacked the strength to carry them out. For ten years he remained loyal to the Babylonians who had given him royal power; then he began to side with a pro-Egyptian faction in his court, withheld tribute from Babylonia, and plotted with the Egyptians. Again the Babylonian armies marched to Judah. They besieged the city of Jerusalem for a year and a half and finally

captured it in August, 587 B.C. This time the city had to suffer much destruction; the temple, the king's palace, and many of the houses were burned. King Zedekiah was captured, his eyes were put out, and he was taken captive to Babylonia along with many of his subjects. The Babylonians now took away the political independence of the Jews and made their land a province of the Babylonian empire. As governor they appointed Gedaliah, a member of a prominent Jewish family. His father, Ahikam, had been an official in the courts of both Josiah and Jehoiakim and had been a friend and protector of Jeremiah. Gedaliah sought to restore law and order, and to lead the Jews in adjusting themselves to Babylonian rule. After a reign of only five years, the governor was assassinated by Ishmael, a member of the old royal family who was goaded on by the Ammonites, enemies of the Jews across the Jordan. After this senseless assassination, the Jews feared reprisals from the Babylonians and many of them fled to Egypt. They forced Jeremiah the prophet to go along with them, and he apparently died in that foreign land. Little is known of the history of the little land of Judah until the return of the exiles some forty years later.

The Spirit of the Times

Such were the times in which Jeremiah lived and sought to carry out his prophetic commission. In the early part of the period we have surveyed, the Hebrews had great hope and high expectations. Their enemies, the Assyrians, who had drained them heavily of tribute, were weakening and were about to fall. King Josiah took advantage of their weakness to extend his political control and to institute far-reaching religious reforms. The best elements in the nation, who

favored true worship of Yahweh and independence from foreign domination in both religion and politics, must have rejoiced at the successes of Josiah.

But the tragic death of Josiah and the elevation to the throne of his son Jehoiakim produced a change in the atmosphere. Jehoiakim was not a true son of his father and hastened the decline of the nation. A new power rose to dominate the world scene, and Jehoiakim submitted to the Babylonians. When he and his successor, Zedekiah, began to play power politics, they brought on the fall of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation.

During these events Jeremiah did not live in an ivory tower. He lived in the midst of his people, pleading with them and exhorting them in the name of his God to renounce their senseless and sinful ways. He dealt with real problems. He was so influential and his words were so significant that kings consulted him, and his enemies feared him so much that they put him in prison. Yet, as we shall see, the prophet did not lose his courage and hope, and continued through all of these events to be the mouthpiece of God to his people and their leaders.

An Era of Great Religious Advance

The general period in which Jeremiah lived was a most remarkable period in the history of the religions of mankind. It embraced the lifetime of several outstanding religious leaders and teachers, some of whom founded new religions that have lasted to the present time. In Judah, Ezekiel the prophet was a contemporary of Jeremiah, and not long after them lived the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile whom we call Second Isaiah (author of Isa. 40-55). Probably with-

in a few years after the death of Jeremiah, three men were born who were to establish new religions or seriously reform old ones: Gautama Buddha in India (born about 570 B.C. and lived for eighty years); Confucius in China (551-479 B.C.), teacher of the basic ethical system by which the Chinese have lived ever since; and Zoroaster in Iran, founder of the religion which survives to this day among the Parsees of India.¹ About the same time as Confucius there lived in another part of China a teacher named Lao-tzu, from whom developed the religion called Taoism, still surviving in China but in a degenerate state. A hundred years after the death of Jeremiah, Socrates, the Greek thinker and philosopher, was born. We cannot prove that any of these men influenced each other, unless Ezekiel and Jeremiah were acquainted, and Lao-tzu and Confucius had personal contacts, as legends affirm. Yet we must say that the sixth century B.C. was a time when mankind's search for God and for the good life made great progress.

¹ The date of Zoroaster is much debated by scholars, some of whom place him as early as 1000 B.C. The above suggestion is based upon the view of A. T. Olmstead and others that the king who was converted by Zoroaster, Vishtaspa (Hystaspes), was the father of Darius; see Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), ch. vii.

CHAPTER III

THE EARLY LIFE OF JEREMIAH

IN THIS SEETHING TIME OF CRISIS AND TRANSITION, JEREMIAH was born, sometime in the third quarter of the seventh century B.C.

His native town was Anathoth, situated only two miles northeast of Jerusalem, marked in modern times by a deserted hill called "Râs el-Kharrûbeh." The location is important for understanding the personality of Jeremiah. He grew up in a small village, with easy access to the countryside, but he was only a short distance from the capital, Jerusalem, and from the great trade route which led to the north from that city. The figures of speech employed by the prophet show that as a lad he must have loved the countryside with its sights and sounds; yet he also knew Jerusalem, and it was there he spent most of his adult life.

Jeremiah's father was Hilkiah, a member of a priestly family. There was a famous Hilkiah who was high priest under King Josiah, but he was not the father of Jeremiah. His family may have ministered as priests in the local sanctuary of Anathoth or, at least after the great reforms of Josiah in 621 B.C., they may have served in the great temple of Jerusalem. It is just possible that Jeremiah's family was descended from Abiathar, one of David's priests, whom Solomon banished to Anathoth upon his accession to the throne (I Kings 2:26); this is only a conjecture. If Jeremiah as a boy was taught the

priestly lore and ritual, he never served as a priest. In his adult life he found himself in opposition to the priests as well as other prophets, and even with members of his own family. Perhaps he knew the weakness of the priesthood from personal experience.

More important for molding the future prophet's thinking and the direction of his life was that he became acquainted with the words of the earlier prophets, either as oral tradition or in written form. He was influenced most by Hosea, who had lived a hundred years before. Jeremiah learned from Hosea of the love of God for Israel, and he learned to describe the defection of Israel from God as adultery or harlotry. When he became a prophet he employed some of the same figures that Hosea had used, and on occasion even quoted lines and phrases from him. He probably became acquainted also with the lives and messages of other great prophets—Elijah, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah of Jerusalem.

The Call of Jeremiah

The time came when Jeremiah was called to follow in their footsteps and become a spokesman for God. He was still young, in his late teens or early twenties. Perhaps as the result of a long period of meditation and brooding, one day he heard Yahweh speak to him:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

—1:5

Jeremiah's reaction was to protest that he was not eloquent, and only a youth. But God spoke again to him, to assure

Jeremiah of his constant presence with him, to strengthen him and give him the words he should speak. The account of his call is in 1:4-10.

In this call of the young Jeremiah we see many of the ingredients that were to enter into his prophetic career: his strong sense of commission to a prophet's task, amounting to belief in divine predestination even before his birth; his hesitancy, arising from a sense of unworthiness; his assurance that God would be with him, to make him a prophet who would be truly spokesman for Another; and his belief that he was called as a prophet to the nations, not solely to his own people.

Soon afterward (or even months later) the young prophet had two visions, recorded in 1:11-19. The first was a vision of a rod of almond. The significance of this vision is almost completely in the word for "almond" in Hebrew, *shākēd* (pronounced shah-káde). This led him to think that Yahweh was "watching over"—in Hebrew *shōkēd*—his word to perform it. Jeremiah understood this in an ominous sense: God was now about to carry out his word of judgment upon Israel.

The second vision was of a seething pot, facing away *from the north*. This vision conveyed to the prophet the fact that the evil which was now about to break forth upon his land would come from the north, the direction from which most conquerors had to come upon Palestine (except the Egyptians, who invaded from the south), and the direction from which the Hebrews were accustomed to think of disaster as coming. Again Jeremiah received assurance of Yahweh's presence, to strengthen him against his enemies when they would not believe his proclamations of doom (1:13-19).

The Temple Sermon

The first public appearance of the young prophet was probably to deliver the temple "sermon" which is recorded in 7:1-15 and ch. 26. Ch. 7 gives full summary of the message of Jeremiah on that occasion, whereas ch. 26, after a brief résumé of the message, gives a full account of the arrest and trial of the prophet.

Jeremiah went to the court of the Jerusalem temple at a time when great crowds were flocking there, probably in celebration of the crowning of King Jehoiakim in the autumn of 609 b.c. Standing before the crowds he addressed them in words that must have impressed them deeply. He accused the people of placing false confidence in the temple for their salvation, and called on them to find true salvation by practicing justice and righteousness in the sight of God. In words that were to be echoed by Jesus centuries later, he cried out: "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (7:11; see Matt. 21:13). He threatened destruction to the beloved temple if the people did not experience genuine moral reformation, saying that Yahweh would do to this temple as he had done centuries before to the temple at Shiloh.

Jeremiah was immediately arrested. He was striking at the very root of much of the religious practice of the time and at the livelihood of the priests and the cultic prophets. In the trial that followed, the priests and prophets sought to have Jeremiah put to death, but many of the people and officials supported him. Jeremiah refused to retract a word of his message and maintained that he was speaking only what Yahweh had commanded him to speak. Some of the elders recalled that the prophet Micah had spoken in similar fashion

against the temple, and his life had been spared by Hezekiah. Jeremiah was acquitted, but he had aroused deep antagonism among the religious leaders and they considered him a dangerous man who must be watched.

Early Messages

Jeremiah was not silenced, even though he may have been forbidden to enter the temple area for a period. He continued to prophesy, delivering many of those messages now preserved in chs. 2-6, and probably portions of later chapters.¹

In these messages Jeremiah calls upon the Hebrews to remember the devotion and loyalty they had shown to their God in the period of the exodus from Egypt and of the wilderness wanderings. After coming into their promised land they took over much of the religion of the Canaanites, deserting Yahweh to worship the Baals of Canaan. Jeremiah says they have forsaken Yahweh, "the fountain of living waters," only to dig for themselves "broken cisterns that can hold no water" (2:13). With many different figures of speech he describes the apostasy and infidelity of his people and calls upon them to return to Yahweh in genuine repentance.

Because of the sinfulness of the Hebrews, Yahweh is now about to bring upon them a mighty foe "from the north," as threatened in the second vision of the prophet described earlier (1:13-19). Jeremiah described in highly imaginative, lyri-

¹ Jeremiah is usually thought to have begun his public career in 626 B.C., and to have delivered these messages in the period before the beginning of the Deuteronomic reformation of 621 B.C. In the present study the start of Jeremiah's career is placed near the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign in 609 B.C. For detailed argument supporting this view, see *The Interpreter's Bible*, V, 779-80, and the exegesis of chs. 2-6, especially 2:14-19, 36-37. See also Appendix I, pages 117-19, of the present book, which gives the chronological order of Jeremiah's life and message.

cal poetry the coming of this foe (4:5-8, 13-22, 27-31; 5:15-17; 6:1-8, 22-26; 8:14-17). Scholars have debated the identity of the enemy from the north. Many have thought he had in mind the Scythians, a primitive people consisting of horse-riding nomads who penetrated into various parts of western Asia in the seventh century B.C. But the descriptions in Jeremiah do not entirely fit the Scythians, and these people did not really menace the Hebrews. It is more probable that Jeremiah was speaking of the Chaldeans, or Babylonians, who did at a later time overrun Judah (see pages 53-58). Whether Jeremiah had in mind the Scythians or the Babylonians or some other foe, one fact is certain: he believed it was Yahweh who was sending them into Judah and that their purpose was to punish his people for their sins.

Jeremiah sought in vain for a single righteous and truth-seeking man, though he looked among both the poor and the great (5:1-14). He could find no one who really knew "the way of the Lord" and tried to walk in it. The people as a whole were stubborn and rebellious. In these chapters the prophet directs his condemnation especially against the sins of false worship and idolatry, but he also condemns social injustice and oppression of the poor by the wealthy (see particularly 5:26-29).

Shortly after the decisive battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.), in which the Egyptians were defeated by the Babylonians, Jeremiah composed the poem in 46:2-12. He expresses joy over the defeat of Egypt, which had been so proud of its power and had earlier brought Judah to submission. Jeremiah recognized the importance of this battle, and the consequences of it led him to take an important step.

Dictation of the Two Scrolls

Up to this time Jeremiah had been delivering his messages in person and had committed none of them to writing. The seriousness of the international situation and the failure of his fellow countrymen to respond to his call for repentance led the prophet to commit his messages to writing and have them read in public. He summoned Baruch, his secretary and disciple, and dictated to him the messages he had delivered from the beginning of his career to that moment. Baruch wrote them on a scroll and took the scroll to the temple. Jeremiah himself was debarred from the temple area, probably as a result of his arrest and trial following his sermon at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign. Baruch read the scroll in the hearing of the people in one of the temple chambers. Some of the officials were so impressed with the words of this scroll that they ordered Baruch to read it in the presence of the assembled officials, and finally they had it read before King Jehoiakim. The king listened to the reading of Jeremiah's words and then contemptuously cut up the scroll with a penknife and burned it in a brazier, before which he was sitting in the winter quarters of his palace. Jeremiah and Baruch went into hiding to escape arrest, and the prophet dictated another scroll to Baruch, this time adding some additional messages.

What was on these scrolls? The first was completely destroyed by the king. The second perished long ago, but scholars have generally conjectured that it formed the original nucleus of the book of Jeremiah as we now have it, a kind of first edition of the book. Many attempts have been made to recover within the present book this original nucleus. The description of the writing and reading of the scroll in ch. 36

indicates that it was short enough to be read through three times in a single day. It must have consisted primarily, or even exclusively, of warnings and threats directed against Jerusalem, Judah, and the nations. We may conjecture that Baruch's scroll contained the following passages: 1:4-14, 17; 2:1-37; 3:1-5, 19-25; 4:1-8, 11-22, 27-31; 5:1-17, 20-31; 6:1-30; and possibly 8:4-9:1.

Composition of the Book of Jeremiah

With this brief discussion of Baruch's scroll as forming the original nucleus of the book of Jeremiah as we have it, we may digress from our description of the life of the prophet to indicate briefly how additions were made to this original nucleus.

The book contains many messages of the prophet delivered after 605 B.C., for he lived to see the fall of Jerusalem nearly twenty years later. It is probable that Baruch himself made a collection of these messages and related material and added them to his original nucleus.² It consisted not only of words of condemnation and warning uttered by the prophet (such as 9:2-9; 13:20-27; 17:1-4; 23:9-33), but also the "Confessions of Jeremiah" (see pages 61-62), laments over national or personal sorrow (such as 9:17-22; 12:7-13; 15:5-9), accounts of dramatic actions of parables (such as those in 13:1-10 and 18:1-6), and possibly messages against foreign nations (46:2-49:33 in part).

The book of Jeremiah has a large amount of biographical material concerning the prophet, especially of events near the

² For detailed listing of the passages which probably constituted this section and the later additions discussed here, see *The Interpreter's Bible*, V, 787-90.

end of his life in Judah. This material seems to have been written by an eyewitness, and the best candidate for its authorship is Baruch, who was intimately associated with Jeremiah as confidant and disciple as well as secretary. This material is found especially within chs. 26–28, 32–39, and 42–44.

The book was not finished when it left the hands of Baruch. Many passages in the book of Jeremiah are very similar, both in style and in thought, to passages in Deuteronomy and in the books which were edited by editors whom we call “Deuteronomists”—Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings. About the year 550 b.c., possibly in Egypt, a man or group of men belonging to the “Deuteronomic school” made an edition of Jeremiah’s book, using what had come down from Baruch, with supplements and revisions at many points. In some cases he (or they) preserved genuine prophecies of Jeremiah in the prophet’s own words (as in 11:15–16; 16:16–17); sometimes he gave the gist of Jeremiah’s message in his own words (as in 7:1–8:3); and sometimes he composed freely and departed somewhat from Jeremiah’s views (as in ch. 24). In addition to these examples, read the following as representative of the work of this editor: 11:1–17; 17:19–27; 25:1–13; and 32:16–44. We should be very grateful to the Deuteronomic editor for preserving so much concerning the life and message of Jeremiah.

Still later, more additions were made to the book of Jeremiah, usually for the purpose of bringing it “up to date.” Among them are some of the messages against foreign nations preserved in chs. 46–51. For details, see in Appendix I the passages listed under VI, B-I. Because these passages are not from Jeremiah himself, we do not use them in interpreting the life and message of this prophet.

CHAPTER IV

THE MIDDLE YEARS

THE DICTATION AND READING OF THE SCROLL, DESCRIBED IN the last chapter, aroused the antagonism of King Jehoiakim, which he expressed by burning the scroll. Yet this did not silence the prophet, who not only dictated a second scroll, but continued to prophesy. Sometime during the reign of King Jehoiakim, Jeremiah expressed his opinion of that king in very strong language. Jeremiah praised the king's father, King Josiah, because he practiced justice and righteousness and judged the cause of the poor and needy (22:15-16). But of King Jehoiakim he said:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice;
who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing,
and does not give him his wages;
who says, "I will build myself a great house
with spacious upper rooms,"
and cuts out windows for it,
paneling it with cedar,
and painting it with vermilion.
Do you think you are a king
because you compete in cedar?

.

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim . . . :

They shall not lament for him, saying,

"Ah my brother!" or "Ah sister!"

They shall not lament for him, saying,

"Ah lord!" or "Ah his majesty!"

With the burial of an ass he shall be buried,

dragged and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

—22:13-15, 18-19

We are not told how long Jeremiah and Baruch remained in hiding from King Jehoiakim; it was probably not longer than a few months. Sometime during the reign of this king, Jeremiah wrote or dictated the passages called "The Confessions of Jeremiah" (see pages 61-62). They were written after the prophet had aroused the antagonism of the religious and civil leaders, and they show the deep sorrow and tension created in his heart and mind. Though he sometimes wished he had never been born (20:14-18), he never lacked courage to continue to be a prophet.

After the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar invaded Syria and Palestine to subdue the little kingdoms of those countries. Details of his invasions have come to light on cuneiform tablets published in 1956.¹ In the first year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Syria-Palestine, which the Babylonians called "Hatti," and, as these tablets inform us, "all the kings of Hatti came before him and he received their heavy tribute."² In that year he captured and destroyed the Philistine city of Ashkelon. However, the Babylonian king's victory cannot have been complete, for he had to in-

¹ D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldaean Kings (626-556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1956). Cf. J. P. Hyatt, "New Light on Nebuchadrezzar and Judean History," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXV (1956), 277-84.

² See Wiseman, *op cit.*, p. 69.

vade the western lands in several successive years. In 601 B.C. he marched to Egypt and fought with the Egyptian army; the result was either a draw or a defeat for the Babylonians. Two years later he scoured the desert east of Palestine and took a great deal of plunder from the Arabs.

It is in the light of these events that we must interpret the various messages against foreign nations preserved in Jer. 46:13-49:33. They are directed against the various surrounding nations: Moab, Ammon, Edom, Philistia, Egypt, and Damascus (Syria). Jeremiah had been called as a "prophet to the nations" (1:5) and had been "set over nations and over kingdoms" (1:10). In these chapters the prophet pronounces Yahweh's judgment upon foreign nations, and either exults or mourns over their defeat. He pictures the defeat of various foreign gods—Apis of Egypt (46:15), Chemosh of Moab (48:7, 13), and Milcom of Ammon (49:3). He declares that Yahweh is destroying these nations for their pride, their attempts to magnify themselves against Yahweh (48:42), and their false confidence in pagan deities. In one of the best-known poems of this group, he prophesies against Moab for her self-satisfaction and stagnancy:

Moab has been at ease from his youth
and has settled on his lees;
he has not been emptied from vessel to vessel,
nor has he gone into exile;
so his taste remains in him,
and his scent is not changed.

—48:11

These messages against foreign nations show in a vivid way how Jeremiah believed Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, was

concerned with the history of other nations as well as with that of the Hebrew people.³

The outcome of the battle of Carchemish led King Jehoahkim to transfer his loyalty from the Egyptians to the Babylonians. After paying them tribute for three years, he rebelled against the Babylonian king and withheld further tribute. This caused the Babylonian king to send against Judah marauding bands of Chaldeans, Syrians, Moabites, and Ammonites, to ravage the land (II Kings 24:2). Jeremiah at this time uttered three laments over the suffering caused in Judah (9:10-11, 17-22; 12:7-13). In a vivid figure he speaks of the land of Judah, Yahweh's heritage, as being "like a speckled bird of prey" that is attacked by the other birds of prey.

Dramatic Parables

At the time of this invasion Jeremiah staged a dramatic parable to convey a message to the people. He summoned to a chamber within the temple area a group of Rechabites. They were a special group among the Jews who had taken vows to refrain from drinking wine, from living in houses, and from tilling the soil. They were seeking to continue to live literally as their ancestors had in the desert centuries before. When these people came at the invitation of Jeremiah to the temple area, he offered them wine to drink. They refused,

³ The messages in these chapters cannot be dated with precision, and some of the material in them is later than Jeremiah. The oracles against Babylon in chs. 50-51 are certainly later than Jeremiah, since they exhibit an attitude toward Babylonia directly opposed to that shown by Jeremiah elsewhere, and they are greatly influenced by late writers such as Second Isaiah. See *The Interpreter's Bible*, V, 1104-37, for more detailed discussion.

saying they would not go contrary to the vows they had taken, but would remain true to the command of their founder, Jonadab the son of Rechab. Jeremiah then delivered a message to the assembled Jews, pointing out that the Rechabites had remained loyal to their founder's command, but the Jews had continually rebelled against Yahweh and disobeyed his commands. So the prophet pronounced judgment against Israel but promised that Yahweh would reward the Rechabites for their loyalty, so that Jonadab the son of Rechab would never lack a man to stand before him (ch. 35). Jeremiah does not say here that all the Jews should live as the Rechabites do, but rather that they should all live by that which they profess. (The date of this episode is indicated by the fact that the Rechabites were at this time living in Jerusalem for protection against the armies of the Chaldeans and Syrians; 35:11.)

Another dramatic parable was acted out by the prophet to bring home to the Jews the seriousness of their sin and the imminence of destruction. At the command of Yahweh, Jeremiah secured a flask, or water decanter, made of pottery and went out to the Potsherd Gate of Jerusalem, taking with him some of the elders and senior priests. He broke the flask in the sight of these men and proclaimed: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended" (19:1-2, 10). This action had perhaps more than a symbolic meaning, for the ancient Hebrews believed that the actions of a prophet often had the power to effect that which they symbolized. A pottery flask was an expensive and artistically made vessel, with a very narrow neck, so that it could not actually be mended. This action was intended by Jeremiah to portray

to the people the inescapability of their doom. He went from the Potsherid Gate to the court of the temple and there cried out: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the evil that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words."

This action and message aroused the anger of the priest Pashhur, head of the temple police, who had the duty of keeping order in the temple area. He arrested Jeremiah, beat him, and placed him in stocks to remain overnight. When Pashhur released the prophet from the stocks on the next day, Jeremiah was in no way intimidated, but said to the priest:

The Lord does not call your name Pashhur, but Terror on every side. For thus says the Lord: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. . . . I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon; he shall carry them captive to Babylon, and shall slay them with the sword. . . . And you, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity; to Babylon you shall go; and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely. (20:3-6.)

The opposition to Jeremiah had now been driven to extreme measures, but beating and imprisonment could not keep Jeremiah from continuing to fulfill his commission as a spokesman for Yahweh.

He had told Pashhur plainly that Yahweh was about to give Judah into the hand of the Babylonian king. In other ways he warned the Judeans concerning the Babylonians (see 13:20-27; 17:1-4; 22:6-7; 25:8-13). It was now clear that the Babylonians constituted the peril "from the north," and that the

Jews were in danger of being captured and ruled over by those who had previously been their friends and allies:

Lift up your eyes and see
those who come from the north.
Where is the flock that was given you,
your beautiful flock?
What will you say when they set as head over you
those whom you yourself have taught
to be friends to you?
Will not pangs take hold of you,
like those of a woman in travail?
And if you say in your heart,
"Why have these things come upon me?"
it is for the greatness of your iniquity
that your skirts are lifted up,
and you suffer violence.

—13:20-22

The First Babylonian Exile

The refusal of the Judeans to pay tribute to Babylonia finally brought a Babylonian army to Judah to besiege Jerusalem (597 B.C.). King Jehoiakim died before or during the siege: we are not told whether the curse pronounced upon him by Jeremiah was literally fulfilled or not. He was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin. The new king reigned for only three months and then surrendered Jerusalem to the Babylonians, on March 16, 597 B.C.⁴ He and many of his subjects were taken into exile in Babylonia.

Jeremiah had repeatedly warned his fellow men of the coming of the Babylonians to bring Yahweh's judgment upon

⁴ This exact date is given in Wiseman, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

them. But he did not rejoice when the judgment came; he expressed sympathy with the people in their suffering. For example, in 10:17-22, his feelings of sympathy are expressed in the form of a dialogue between the prophet and the city personified as a mother who has lost her children. First the prophet speaks to the city:

Gather up your bundle from the ground,
O you who dwell under siege!
For thus says the Lord:
“Behold, I am slinging out the inhabitants of the land
at this time,
and I will bring distress on them,
that they may feel it.”

Then the city speaks, personified as Mother Zion:

Woe is me because of my hurt!
My wound is grievous.
But I said, “Truly this is an affliction,
and I must bear it.”
My tent is destroyed,
and all my cords are broken;
my children have gone from me,
and they are not;
there is no one to spread my tent again,
and to set up my curtains.
For the shepherds are stupid,
and do not inquire of the Lord;
therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.

Finally the prophet speaks again:

Hark, a rumor! Behold, it comes—
a great commotion out of the north country
to make the cities of Judah a desolation,
a lair of jackals.

Another lament uttered at this time is 15:5-9; and a message of condemnation against Jerusalem may be found in 22:20-23.

Jeremiah believed it was Yahweh's will that King Jehoiachin should go into exile. There is an oracle directed against that king in 22:24-30. It ends as follows:

Thus says the Lord:
"Write this man down as childless,
a man who shall not succeed in his days;
for none of his offspring shall succeed
in sitting on the throne of David,
and ruling again in Judah."

Jehoiachin was not literally childless, for I Chr. 3:17-18 gives the names of his seven children. His grandson Zerubbabel was governor of Judah about 520 b.c. and led an unsuccessful attempt to establish Jewish independence from Persian rule; however, neither he nor any of his descendants actually succeeded in ruling on the throne of David.

When the king, his mother, and many of the Jews were taken into exile, Jeremiah composed a lamentation to express his sorrow (see 13:15-19).

The Babylonians did not take away the political independence of Judah after they received the surrender of Jerusalem and exiled its king. They placed on the throne an uncle of Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, brother to the former king Jehoiakim. King Zedekiah was made of different mettle from Jehoiakim.

He was not unscrupulous, selfish, and wicked as his brother had been. He usually respected the views of Jeremiah and seemed to wish to follow his advice; in the end, however, he proved to be weak and vacillating and lost his kingdom.

Letter to the Exiles

Early in this reign Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles in Babylonia. They needed his clear-sighted counsel. Many of them were expecting that Yahweh would soon bring them back to Judah, and they were being encouraged in this expectation by the prophets among them. Was not Israel the chosen people of Yahweh, and was not Judah their promised land? Was it not natural to suppose that their God would soon lead them back? Some of them believed that Jehoiachin was the only legitimate king and would not recognize Zedekiah.

Jeremiah threw a great dash of cold water on their expectations. He wrote to them plainly:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (29:5-7.)

Yet he promised that Yahweh would eventually visit his people and bring them back (29:10-14). He tried to make them see, however, that true religion does not depend upon residence in the promised land, but rather upon the seeking of God in the right way: "You will seek me and find me; when

you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes" (29:13-14).

The leaders in Babylonia did not like this letter from Jeremiah. One of them, Shemaiah of Nehelam, wrote to Jerusalem to Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, the new head of the temple police who was supposed to have charge "over every madman who prophesies," complaining that he had not rebuked Jeremiah for sending such a letter. Zephaniah showed the letter to Jeremiah, who wrote back to Babylonia condemning Shemaiah (29:24-32).

"Submit to the Yoke of Babylon"

Another incident early in the reign of Zedekiah throws a flood of light on Jeremiah's attitude in this period. Four years after Zedekiah came to the throne, a new Pharaoh began to rule in Egypt, Psamtik II. This event led the rulers of some of the little kingdoms in Syria and Trans-Jordan to send envoys to Judah, to attempt to induce Zedekiah to join in a rebellion against the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, doubtless with Egyptian aid. Jeremiah made his position crystal clear to these envoys, to Zedekiah, and to the people in general: All of these nations ought to submit to the yoke of Babylonia, for Yahweh has given them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, who is really the servant of Yahweh, performing his will. To dramatize his position, Jeremiah made a wooden yoke like the kind used on oxen, put it on his neck, and went around saying: Submit to the yoke of the king of Babylon (ch. 27).

Jeremiah soon met opposition from another prophet, Hananiah son of Azzur, from Gibeon. Using Jeremiah's own figure, he proclaimed that Yahweh had broken the yoke of the king of Babylon and would bring the exiles back within two

years. Jeremiah's first reaction was to say, "Amen! May the Lord do so," while reminding Hananiah that most of the prophets of ancient times had not prophesied good fortune, but rather "war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms" (28:8). To symbolize his message, Hananiah took the yoke-bars from Jeremiah's neck and broke them.

Jeremiah went his way but soon came back to the people with a true word of the Lord. Hananiah was told, "Thus says the Lord: You have broken wooden bars, but I will make in their place bars of iron. . . . I have put upon the neck of all these nations an iron yoke of servitude to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon" (28:13-14). For uttering rebellion against Yahweh, Hananiah died within the same year.

As we proceed in the next chapter to follow the fortunes of Jeremiah in the closing years of the kingdom of Judah, we must remember that his view did not change. He continued to give the same counsel: Submit to the yoke of Babylon. The reason for this view was partly that he was more practical and clear-eyed than most people in his day, and realized that tiny Judah could not actually succeed in rebelling against mighty Babylonia, even with several allies. Yet Jeremiah's message was based fundamentally upon his understanding of the will of Yahweh. He believed that Yahweh had chosen even the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar to carry out his will, and that Judah's safety lay in submission to the yoke of Yahweh's servant.

CHAPTER V

THE CLOSING YEARS

KING ZEDEKIAH MUST HAVE LISTENED TO JEREMIAH IN 594 B.C., when the envoys from surrounding nations tried to persuade him to join in revolt against Babylonia and the prophet dramatically advised submission to the yoke of Babylon. The king continued his policy of submission for six years more, but there was mounting pressure from the pro-Egyptian party among his advisers and officials. An increasing number of the men around the king believed that Judah should join in alliance with Egypt and other kingdoms to revolt against the yoke of Babylon.

The conflict between the pro-Babylonian and pro-Egyptian groups at the court and among the people of Jerusalem is reflected in a message of the prophet, 13:12-14. He quoted a familiar proverb derived from a tippler's saying: "Every jar shall be filled with wine." When his listeners replied, "Do we not indeed know that every jar will be filled with wine?" Jeremiah said to them:

Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will fill with drunkenness all the inhabitants of this land: the kings who sit on David's throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will dash them one against another, fathers and sons together, says the Lord. I will not pity or spare or have compassion, that I should not destroy them.

Elsewhere drunkenness from Yahweh is a symbol of the divine judgment (25:15-18), and the dashing together of the people reflects the clash of opposing factions in Zedekiah's reign.

Finally, however, the party that believed in rebellion against Babylonia won, and Zedekiah stopped paying tribute. Again the army of Babylonia came to Judah. After taking over the outlying cities of Judah, they besieged Jerusalem. The siege lasted for a long time, from January of 588 B.C. to August of 587 B.C., and brought much hardship to the inhabitants. Zedekiah refused to surrender, as Jehoiachin had done earlier, and the Babylonians finally captured Jerusalem, with the disastrous results already listed (page 28).

By good fortune the book of Jeremiah has preserved for us numerous details of the life and message of Jeremiah in this period of the closing months of the Judean kingdom and the governorship of Gedaliah. Some of the details are so intimate that many scholars believe the record was composed by Baruch, who had been an eyewitness of the events he records. As they are now preserved in the book, they are not in chronological order. It is possible, however, to recover the chronological sequence, and thus to set down the episodes in order for the final years of Judah's independence, the governorship of Gedaliah, and Jeremiah's own closing years. We shall summarize these episodes briefly and give the scriptural references in which the reader may find the details.

Warning to Zedekiah

In the summer or fall of 589 B.C., before the actual siege of Jerusalem began, Jeremiah warned King Zedekiah that

Yahweh was about to give Jerusalem into the hand of the Babylonian king, but promised to Zedekiah a peaceful death and an honorable burial, probably on condition that he surrender the city to the Babylonians (34:1-7). The time of this warning can be fixed by close study of 34:7. There we are told that the warning was issued by Jeremiah when only the towns of Lachish and Azekah were left from the fortified towns of Judah. Now it happens that archaeologists have found at Lachish (modern Tell ed-Duweir, twenty-three miles southwest of Jerusalem) a group of letters written on broken pieces of pottery. These letters had been sent by the captain of a Hebrew outpost to the military commander in Lachish. Letter IV contains this sentence: "We are watching for the smoke-signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord gave, because we do not see Azekah."¹ The letter was apparently written after Azekah had fallen, but while Lachish was still standing. These are the two towns mentioned in 34:7. The Babylonians probably followed the time-honored practice of capturing the smaller towns of a country before laying siege to the capital.

Temporary Lifting of the Siege of Jerusalem

A few months after the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (probably spring of 588 B.C.), an Egyptian army marched to the aid of the Jews, and the Babylonians lifted the siege for a short time. Zedekiah sent a deputation to the prophet asking him to pray for the city. Jeremiah sent back word to the

¹ Harry Torczyner, *et al.*, *The Lachish Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 79, 83-84.

king that the Babylonians would return to Jerusalem and capture it, for that was Yahweh's will (37:1-10; a variant account of the same episode is preserved in 21:1-10).

Another incident occurred during the interval when the siege of Jerusalem was temporarily lifted. When the siege first began, Zedekiah had issued a royal proclamation that all Hebrew slaves should be set free. With such a conspicuous show of piety the king and his subjects hoped to secure the favor of Yahweh, and incidentally avoid the necessity of supporting the slaves (who could not go out to work the fields while the siege was on) and also secure more men for the defense of the city. But now that the siege was lifted, at the approach of the Egyptian allies, the slaveowners took back their former slaves. Jeremiah rebuked them for such obvious hypocrisy and again proclaimed clearly that the Babylonian army would return and carry out Yahweh's judgment upon the city and its inhabitants (34:8-22).

Soon afterward Jeremiah set out from Jerusalem to go to the land of Benjamin, presumably to his native town of Anathoth. When he reached the Benjamin Gate he was promptly arrested by a sentry, who said: "You are deserting to the Chaldeans." This was a natural charge, for Jeremiah had been advising submission to Babylon, and everyone doubtless believed he was "pro-Babylonian." Jeremiah denied the charge but was brought before the officials, who beat him and imprisoned him in the house of Jonathan the secretary, which had been made into a prison (37:11-15). Jeremiah was to remain in custody until the fall of Jerusalem a little over a year later.

Jeremiah in Prison

Though he was in prison, Jeremiah was still considered to be a prophet of Yahweh by the Judean king, who sent for him to come to the royal palace for a secret interview. When Zedekiah inquired, "Is there any word from the Lord?" Jeremiah replied without fear, "There is. . . . You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon." Jeremiah then asked the king to move him from the house of Jonathan to a less confining place of imprisonment. The king ordered that he be transferred to the court of the guard, which was probably an open court in the palace compound, less confining than the house of Jonathan and more open to the public (37:16-21).

The army of Babylonians came back, defeated the Egyptians, and resumed the siege of Jerusalem, probably in the summer or early fall, 588 B.C. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah that he should "redeem" some property in Anathoth belonging to his cousin, Hanamel son of Shallum, thus fulfilling the law of Lev. 25:25-28. Hanamel had suffered loss because of the Babylonian invasion. The cousin came to the court of the guard, and Jeremiah meticulously carried out the legal transaction, paying over seventeen shekels of silver and making two copies of the deed. Then he said, "For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." (32:1-15.) This action on the part of the prophet is very revealing of his attitude toward the future of his land, which even then was seriously threatened by the Babylonians (see pages 100-102).

The siege had been in effect for more than a year, and the time of capture was drawing near. Jeremiah continued nevertheless to counsel submission to Babylon, saying, "Thus says

the Lord, He who stays in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but he who goes out to the Chaldeans shall live." Naturally the officials did not like this. They sent a message to the king to make a request: "Let this man be put to death, for he is weakening the hands of the soldiers who are left in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm." Zedekiah was weak and he told the officials to do to Jeremiah whatever they wished. So they placed him in a cistern, which had in it no water but only mire. (This was probably the latter part of the summer in 587 B.C., near the end of the dry season.) The prophet would have died of starvation and suffocation had it not been for the prompt and merciful action of Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian who was an official of the palace. With the king's permission he lifted Jeremiah out of the cistern by ropes and returned him to the court of the guard. (38:1-13.)

King Zedekiah, now in great extremity, sent a second time for Jeremiah to come for a secret interview, this time at the third entrance of the temple. Jeremiah repeated the advice he had given several times before: If the king will surrender to the Babylonians, his life will be spared and Jerusalem will be saved; if not, the city will be burned, and the king himself will not escape. Zedekiah indicated that he really wished to follow the prophet's counsel but said he was afraid of the Jews who had already deserted to the Chaldeans, who might abuse him. Jeremiah promised that he would not be given over to them, but rather that his life would be spared. (38:14-23.) The poor king was too weak to do what he really considered to be right, and before long Jerusalem fell.

Jeremiah with Governor Gedaliah

When Jerusalem fell, in August of 587 B.C., the Babylonian officers released Jeremiah from his prison and delivered him over to Gedaliah, who was appointed as governor of Judah under the Babylonian king. Though he may have been offered safe conduct to Babylonia (40:4), the prophet chose to stay in Palestine with his own people.

Very little is known concerning the life of Jeremiah during the governorship of Gedaliah. His name is not mentioned in the account of this period in 40:7-41:18. He probably supported Gedaliah in his attempts to rebuild the land and opposed those who wished to rebel against Babylonia. The beautiful poems preserved in 31:2-6, 15-22 may come from this time (see pages 103-5). In them Jeremiah expresses his hope for the future, based on Yahweh's continuing love for his people.

After the senseless assassination of Gedaliah, some of the Jews wished to flee to Egypt. They came to Jeremiah and asked the prophet to pray to Yahweh to discover his will for them. After ten days Jeremiah told them it was Yahweh's will that they remain in Judah and not flee to Egypt. The men refused to believe the prophet, accusing Baruch of setting him against them in order to deliver them into the hand of the Babylonians. So they went to Egypt against the word of Yahweh and took with them the unwilling prophet and Baruch (42:1-43:7).

Jeremiah in Egypt

Jeremiah was taken to Tahpanhes, or Daphnae, a city near the eastern border of the Egyptian delta. There Jeremiah continued to rebuke his fellow countrymen.

On one occasion he carried out a symbolic action to show them that even in Egypt the Jews were not safe from Nebuchadnezzar. In a public place Jeremiah made a structure of stones to resemble the pedestal of a throne. Then he proclaimed to the people:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and he will set his throne above these stones which I have hid, and he will spread his royal canopy over them. He shall come and smite the land of Egypt. . . . He shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt; and he shall burn them and carry them away captive. . . . He shall break the obelisks of Heliopolis which is in the land of Egypt. (43:10-13.)

This message is interesting as evidence that Jeremiah still considered Nebuchadnezzar to be a servant of Yahweh, who would exert His power in Egypt; but in point of fact, Nebuchadnezzar did not conquer the land of Egypt. That country remained independent until it was conquered by Cambyses, king of the Persian Empire. Two of the "obelisks of Heliopolis" mentioned in this passage can now be seen in Central Park, New York City, and on the Thames Embankment in London.

Jeremiah condemned the Hebrews in Egypt for continuing to worship the queen of heaven, Ishtar, rather than Yahweh. Such worship was carried out especially by the Hebrew women, for Ishtar was a goddess of fertility, known to the Assyrians and the Babylonians. (44:1-30.)

The last message in the book of Jeremiah assigned to the prophet concerns Hophra, Pharaoh of Egypt. It says that Yahweh will give Pharaoh Hophra into the hand of his enemies,

as Yahweh had earlier given Zedekiah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. (44:30.) Hophra was put to death in 569 B.C. We must conclude that Jeremiah was still alive at this time; he probably died not long after this message.

We do not know how or when Jeremiah died. In the course of time a legend arose that he died in Egypt, stoned to death by the Jews themselves.²

²The legend goes back at least to the first century A.D., for it is found in a work which has survived in Greek, entitled "The Lives of the Prophets" (see the edition by C. C. Torrey, *The Lives of the Prophets, Greek Text and Translation* [Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 1946], p. 35).

*CHAPTER VI***JEREMIAH'S PERSONALITY**

NOW THAT WE HAVE SURVEYED THE EVENTS OF JEREMIAH's life, we can turn to the question: What kind of man was this prophet who seemed to be always fighting losing battles? What was his personality? Fortunately we are in a good position to answer the question because of the nature of the material preserved in the book which bears his name.

The book of Jeremiah contains, in addition to messages proclaimed by the prophet and biographical material about him, a number of sections which are usually called the "Confessions of Jeremiah": 10:23-24; 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:9-10, 14-18; 18:18-23; and 20:7-18. The term "confession" is not very appropriate to the contents of these passages. Some of them are in the form of a monologue or soliloquy, or rather an outcry of the prophet (15:10; 20:14-18). Most are prayers to God, and in three sections we have both the prophet's prayer and the answer of God (11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:15-21). These poems may have been composed approximately in their present order, since the last one represents the climax of Jeremiah's bitterness. They seem to come from the middle or the latter half of Jehoiakim's reign, after Jeremiah had been prophesying for some years and had met with cool or hostile reception; if so, they were written before he became deeply involved in the political crises of his age.

These "Confessions" are unique in the prophetic books. No other prophet bares his soul as did Jeremiah; probably no other was so tortured in spirit. The nearest approach to these confessions is to be found in some of the psalms.

Tension Between Nature and Duty

If we examine these confessions and some of the other self-revealing passages in the book, we find that one word summarizes the inner life of Jeremiah: tension. There was in his soul a deep conflict between nature and duty, between the desire to follow his native inclinations and the desire to follow the call of God. Such a conflict is not unusual in great men; it is displayed with unusual clarity in Jeremiah's life.

As a man Jeremiah was warm-hearted and emotional. Like other men, he wanted the companionship and good will of his fellow men. He may have been unduly shy, timid, and introspective. We can see his native timidity at the time of his call, when he protested to God that he was only a youth and not eloquent, and thus not fit to be a prophet. We can see how emotional was his nature as we read the first six chapters and note how excited he became over the approach of the enemy from the north. His tenderness and great love for his fellow men are shown in the passages in which he weeps over the sufferings they had to undergo. Note the following:

My grief is beyond healing,
my heart is sick within me.

—8:18

For the wound of the daughter of my people¹ is
my heart wounded,

¹ This phrase, as used here and in the following lines, means "my people" personified as a young woman.

I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people
not been restored?
O that my head were waters,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain of the daughter of my people!

—8:21-9:1

Let my eyes run down with tears night and day,
and let them not cease,
for the virgin daughter of my people is smitten
with a great wound,
with a very grievous blow.

—14:17

These passages, besides illustrating the emotional tenderness of the prophet, show us that Jeremiah, like Jesus, wept over the sufferings of his people rather than for himself.

Jeremiah's Sense of Duty

Jeremiah thus was by nature sensitive and introspective. Yet duty, in the form of his call to be a prophet of Yahweh, compelled him to deliver a very unpopular message and to set himself against the people of his time. He was denied the pleasures of family life, being specifically forbidden to marry and have children, and he was told not to participate in the everyday joys and sorrows of his fellow men (16:1-9). He was continually complaining to them about their sinfulness and their shortcomings in God's sight; he had to warn them of ap-

proaching catastrophe as punishment. He says in one of his confessions:

For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"
—20:8

In proclaiming his message Jeremiah found himself in opposition to nearly everyone: the priests, the popular false prophets, the king and his officials, and the common people. His principal antagonists were the religious leaders, those from whom he might have expected sympathy and co-operation. His friends and supporters—few as they were—apparently were found among the officials, and sometimes in the king's palace.

The result of this violent inner conflict was that Jeremiah was a man of fluctuating moods. At times he was very despondent and depressed. He sometimes wished that he had never been born, or wanted to run away from his prophetic calling and live alone in the desert.

In 15:10 he says: "Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me!"

In a more extended outcry he says:

Cursed be the day
on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed!
Cursed be the man
who brought the news to my father,
"A son is born to you,"

making him very glad.
Let that man be like the cities
 which the Lord overthrew without pity;
let him hear a cry in the morning
 and an alarm at noon,
because he did not kill me in the womb;
 so my mother would have been my grave,
 and her womb for ever great.
Why did I come forth from the womb
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame?

—20:14-18

When Jeremiah wished to run away from his prophetic mission, he expressed the desire in these words:

O that I had in the desert
 a wayfarers' lodging place,
that I might leave my people
 and go away from them!
For they are all adulterers,
 a company of treacherous men.

—9:2

Sometimes in his despondent moods, when he reacted against the persecution and calumny he met, Jeremiah even shook his fist at God and accused the Deity of deceiving him. He cried out:

Why is my pain unceasing,
 my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,
 like waters that fail?

—15:18

JEREMIAH: PROPHET OF COURAGE AND HOPE

These words were addressed to the God he had described elsewhere as "a fountain of living waters," utterly different from broken cisterns that could hold no water (2:13). Here he accuses God himself of deceiving him and failing him.

Jeremiah gave expression to his most despondent feeling in the following words:

O Lord, thou hast deceived me,
and I was deceived;
thou art stronger than I,
and thou hast prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
everyone mocks me.

For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.

—20:7-8

The verb in this poem which is translated "deceive" is a very strong one. It is used in Exod. 22:16 to mean "seduce" (a virgin); in I Kings 22:20-22 it is used of the lying spirit that goes to deceive Ahab. In this outcry Jeremiah considers God as his antagonist, his enemy, who overpowers him and persuades him to do what he does not naturally want to do; he is made to do an unpleasant task that brings upon him only reproach and derision. Perhaps the closest passage in the Old Testament is that in which Job says to his friends:

If indeed you magnify yourselves against me,
and make my humiliation an argument against me,
know then that God has put me in the wrong,
and closed his net about me.

—Job 19:5-6

Jeremiah's moods were not always moods of despondence and depression. He had moments and periods of elation. He expresses this most clearly in 15:16:

Thy words were found, and I ate them,
and thy words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart.

There are few such passages in the book. It must be said of Jeremiah that he did not enjoy being a prophet. His mood and attitude were different from that of a prophet such as Amos, who seems to have had no great qualms in prophesying doom. It has been said that Bishop Athanasius was the type of man who did not mind finding himself arrayed against the rest of the world. Jeremiah, however, was not that kind of man. He was more like Hamlet:

The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!

(Act I, scene 5)

When Jeremiah prayed to God in his periods of despondency, or when he sought answers to the questions raised by his suffering, he received little sympathy and certainly no coddling. What he received was a challenge to continued faithfulness, with the promise that God would strengthen him if he remained faithful.

In 12:1-6 Jeremiah boldly argues with God over the question, Why does the way of the wicked prosper? He reminds God:

Thou plantest them, and they take root;
they grow and bring forth fruit;

thou art near in their mouth
and far from their heart.
But thou, O Lord, knowest me;
thou seest me, and triest my mind toward thee.
Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter,
and set them apart for the day of slaughter.

—12:2-3

Then the reply is given him:

If you have raced with men on foot, and they have
wearied you,
how will you compete with horses?
And if in a safe land you fall down,
how will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?

—12:5

Here is no rational reply to his question, no sympathy for his suffering, but a challenge to gird his loins for more difficult tasks in the future.

Again, after Jeremiah complained to God that he was like “a deceitful brook, like waters that fail,” there came the reply of God:

If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.
They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.
And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,

but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you.

—15:19-20

It may be of interest to raise the question: If Jeremiah had such a strong conflict within his nature, why did he not break under it? Jeremiah apparently never contemplated suicide; indeed, suicide is very rare among Semitic peoples. In seeking an answer for Jeremiah's own ability to overcome his conflicts, we must say two things:

Jeremiah had the wisdom and ability to give utterance to his doubts and fears, even—as we have said—to shake his fist at God. From one point of view this may seem sacrilegious. Modern psychology would say, however, that it was a very salutary and wholesome thing for Jeremiah to do, as it was likewise for Job. Had Jeremiah kept his conflicts wholly within himself and not given expression to them, they might have caused him to break down.

The other reason is that Jeremiah did not at any time, so far as we can see, doubt the existence of God and his ultimate goodness. He could shake his fist at God and accuse him of deceiving or failing him, but in that very act he proclaimed his belief in the reality of God. If in such moments he seemed to deny the goodness of God and the faith that God was on his own side, he could nevertheless say:

The Lord is with me as a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
they will not overcome me.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.

Their eternal dishonor
will never be forgotten.

—20:11

Jeremiah was convinced that God was really fighting at his side, and that the ultimate purposes of God for himself as well as for the people of Judah were good, seeking their welfare, even if they had to suffer affliction that seemed to indicate otherwise.

The Courage of Jeremiah

There is abundant evidence in Jeremiah's life that his inner tension did not overcome him, but rather that in conquering it he was strengthened for his prophetic tasks. If the principal characteristic of Jeremiah's inner life was *tension*, the principal characteristic of his outer life—his relationships to his fellow men—was *courage*. No prophet of ancient Israel displayed greater courage than he, and there is no indication that his courage ever deserted him when he needed it.

There were many occasions in Jeremiah's life when he displayed this quality, but we may point especially to three occasions.

The first is the occasion of his temple sermon, to which reference has already been made. In this he set himself squarely against the popular religious leaders—the priests who offered sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple, and the prophets who were attached to the temple as oracle-interpreters and specialists in intercessory prayer. When Jeremiah proclaimed the coming destruction of the temple if the people did not repent, it is no wonder that the priests and prophets immediately arrested him and tried to put him to death for his

blasphemy. He was striking directly at the institution which was the center of their faith and the source of their livelihood. When Jeremiah was tried in one of the city gates, he defended himself with these words: "The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard." Then, after repeating his message without any qualification, he continued:

As for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the Lord sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears. (26:14-15.)

One is readily reminded of the words of Martin Luther before the Diet of Worms: "Here stand I. I can do no other."

The second incident in Jeremiah's life to which we call attention is his second arrest, as a result of which he was imprisoned and placed in stocks. It is recorded in 19:1-20:6 (see pages 44-45). Jeremiah carried out a symbolical action by which he predicted the fall of the city of Jerusalem: he took an earthenware flask and went out to the Valley of Hinnom and there broke the flask in the presence of a group of elders and senior priests, declaring in the name of Yahweh: "So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended" (19:11). Jeremiah was arrested by Pashhur, the chief of the temple police, who beat Jeremiah, placed him in stocks, and left him there overnight. The next morning, when Pashhur released the prophet, Jeremiah said to him: "The Lord does not call your name Pashhur, but Terror on every side. For thus says the Lord: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and

to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on." (20:3-4.) Then after speaking of the coming capture of Jerusalem and exile of the people, he said to the chief of the temple police: "And you, Pashhur, and all who dwell in your house, shall go into captivity; to Babylon you shall go; and there you shall die, and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends, to whom you have prophesied falsely" (20:6). One is immediately reminded of Amos' parting words to Amaziah, who must have occupied at Bethel a position similar to that of Pashhur in Jerusalem. (See Amos 7:16-17.) In both cases the prophet had the courage to say the last word.

The third illustration of Jeremiah's courage which we cite occurred shortly before the fall of Jerusalem. The illustration consists of two separate but closely related incidents—the two interviews which Jeremiah the prophet had with Zedekiah the king during the time of the siege of the capital city, not long before its fall. The siege of Jerusalem began in January of 588 B.C. and lasted for a year and a half. Jeremiah's message during the siege was always: Submit to the yoke of Babylon, for that is the will of God. During a short interval, when the siege was lifted by the Babylonians at the approach of an army from Egypt, Jeremiah attempted to leave Jerusalem and go to Anathoth. He was immediately arrested on a charge of deserting to the enemy—a very natural charge. The officials must have thought that the prophet was only acting on his own advice and going over to the enemy. Jeremiah denied the charge but was nevertheless placed in prison. He remained in prison for fourteen or fifteen months, at first in the house of Jonathan the scribe and later in an open court of the palace compound. His imprisonment was not closely

confining, except for the short time that he was placed in an abandoned cistern with the expectation that he would die of starvation. Twice during his imprisonment the king sent for him, to ask for the "word of the Lord." The two accounts are in 37:16-21 and 38:14-28 (the account in 21:1-10 is a duplicate of the first interview, without independent value). The first time the king asked: "Is there any word from the Lord?" Jeremiah's reply was: "There is. . . . You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon." In the second interview, which took place after Jeremiah's imprisonment in a cistern, the king's question was similar. Jeremiah's reply was:

If you will surrender to the princes of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the princes of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.

In both cases Jeremiah's words must have been displeasing to the king, and he must have known he was risking his life in speaking them; but he did not shrink from speaking the truth as he saw it.

In commenting on the first interview, Bernhard Duhm has written words that might well apply to both these occasions. He says of the scene in which the king consults the prophet:

This scene is just as moving as it is historically interesting: on the one hand is the prophet, disfigured by mistreatment, the prison atmosphere and privations, but firm in his predictions, without any invective against his persecutors, without defiance, exaggeration or fanaticism, simple, physically mild and humble;

on the other hand is the king, who obviously against his own will had been led by his officials into the war venture, anxiously watching the lips of the martyr for a favorable word for himself, whispering secretly with the man whom his officials imprisoned for treason, weak, a poor creature but not evil, a king but much more bound than the prisoner who stands before him.²

These illustrations of Jeremiah's courage all involve the arrest of the prophet, in some cases his imprisonment. But they were not the only occasions when he displayed courage. Throughout his public career he boldly and unflinchingly proclaimed the word and the will of God as he understood them. He was nearly always a bearer of bad news. His prophetic mission not only brought him inner conflict; it placed him in conflict with the leaders and probably most of the common people of his day. It is small wonder he rebelled against being a prophet! Yet he conquered the inner tension and faced courageously the outer conflict through his confidence in God—in God's power and God's goodness. Jeremiah was a faithful prophet of God.

* *Das Buch Jeremia* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1901), p. 301.

CHAPTER VII

THE GOD OF JEREMIAH

GOD IS "THE CENTER AND SOURCE OF ACTION, NOT THE END-point of thought. He is the locus of commitment, not a problem for debate." These words of Thomas R. Kelly¹ are applicable to an Old Testament prophet such as Jeremiah. Jeremiah was not a professional theologian, but a prophet. He was not a systematic or "original" thinker; he was a spokesman for the living God to the people of his age.

Yet Jeremiah was a theologian in that he was constantly dealing with theological matters, and everything he had to say implied a theological basis. His conception of God's nature was derived from *acquaintance with*, rather than *knowledge about*, God.

Jeremiah's experiences with God were hardly unique, for other prophets had similar experiences, but his reaction to those experiences was often different. Contrast his experience with that of a prophet such as Isaiah. Both believed that God is exalted and transcendent; for both God meant power. In the presence of divine power and holiness Isaiah bowed himself in awe and volunteered to serve (Isa. 6). Jeremiah likewise experienced the power of God; it did not leave him trembling in awe, but rather questioning, confused, and some-

¹ *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1941), pp. 34-35.

times even doubting and rebelling. To Jeremiah, Yahweh must have seemed closer than to most of the prophets. At the time of his call he hesitated to answer the prophetic summons; and we have seen that on certain occasions he could even shake his fist at God and accuse God of failing or deceiving him. Yet Jeremiah had no less of reverence than Isaiah, and was not less faithful than Isaiah in the prophetic office. God could use men of differing temperaments. The prophet was never an empty shell to be used by God, but a living human being whose talents and will—such as they were—were devoted to God's service.

Theology of Prophecy

Jeremiah came into more frequent and perhaps more severe conflict with the false or unfaithful prophets than did any other great prophet; at least he has more to say against them than any other. Because of this fact, and the vividness and frankness of many of Jeremiah's words, we can study in his book better than any other the "theology of prophecy," or what is sometimes called the "psychology of prophecy." The very existence of the prophet and of prophecy implies a certain view of God—the view that God reveals himself and his will to mankind through chosen people. Every prophet considered himself to be the spokesman of God; but he was only the spokesman, the intermediary. The real speaker was God himself. The Hebrews believed that their God spoke in several different ways to men of the world; one of the most frequent ways, and one of the most trustworthy, was through the prophet.

Jeremiah gives us insight into the *method* by which the prophet was believed to obtain the "word of God" to be

delivered to men. In speaking of the unfaithful prophets, he says:

For who among them has stood in the council of the Lord
to perceive and to hear his word,
or who has given heed to his word and listened?

—23:18

“I did not send the prophets,
yet they ran;
I did not speak to them,
yet they prophesied.
But if they had stood in my council,
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
and they would have turned them from their evil way,
and from the evil of their doings.”

—23:21-22

Jeremiah says that the false prophet does not stand in the council of the Lord, and implies that the true prophet does stand in that council. The Hebrew word here translated “council” is *sôd*. It may mean either c-o-u-n-c-i-l or c-o-u-n-s-e-l. In Amos 3:7 it is used with the latter meaning:

Surely the Lord God does nothing,
without revealing his secret [or counsel]
to his servants the prophets.

The concept of a “council [or assembly] of God” is expressed in a number of other Old Testament passages:

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.

—Ps. 82:1

For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord,
a God feared in the council of the holy ones [*sôd qedôshîm*],
great and terrible above all that are round about him?

—Ps. 89:6-7

The same idea is to be found also in Job 1-2, in the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in I Kings 22:19-22, in Isa. 6, and perhaps elsewhere. These passages show us the Hebrew belief that Yahweh presided over a “divine council,” which was composed of himself and lower supernatural beings under his power and control, called “sons of God,” “holy ones,” spirits, angels, etc. The thought goes back ultimately to Mesopotamian and Canaanite ideas of a “council of the gods” that controlled the affairs of gods and of men.

Now, Jeremiah implies that the true prophet has access to this divine council. In some realistic sense the prophet might be transported to the place where this council was held, and so he might “stand in the council of God” and receive his message from God. When he receives such a message, he goes forth to condemn the sins of men, to turn them from their evil ways back to God, and not to offer them false hopes and shallow comfort, as the false prophets did. It is a terrifying task which is given to the prophet of the Lord.

God as Sovereign Power

The Hebrews thought of Yahweh as a sovereign power ruling the world, and ruling their lives and their history. Jeremiah experienced this power in his own life. In his call he felt that Yahweh overpowered him and made of him a prophet even if he did not wish to be. In his confessions he

reveals that he experienced a divine compulsion to prophesy, overcoming his own will and desire. One of the most famous passages in the book of Jeremiah is 20:9:

If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

In several remarkable passages Jeremiah speaks of the power of God in the creation and sustaining of the world of nature. He comes close to having a conception of "natural law" such as we find in modern thought.

In 5:22, Yahweh says:

I placed the sand as the bound for the sea
a perpetual barrier which it cannot pass;
though the waves toss, they cannot prevail,
though they roar, they cannot pass over it.
But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart;
they have turned aside and gone away.

Again in 8:7:

Even the stork in the heavens
knows her times;
and the turtledove, swallow, and crane
keep the time of their coming;
but my people know not
the ordinance of the Lord.

This idea is an expression of what we call the migration instinct of the birds; Jeremiah thinks of them as obeying the law of God directly.

A third passage is 27:5, perhaps not in the actual words of Jeremiah, but expressing his thought of creation: "It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me."

In the first two of these passages Jeremiah is not interested in creation or in "natural law" for its own sake; he is interested in contrasting physical nature's obedience to God with man's disobedience. In the third he is interested in the fact that God is able to do with the earth as his sovereign will dictates. We shall return to the first of these two emphases later.

One of the most characteristic Hebrew conceptions of Deity was that Yahweh was in control of the history of the Hebrew people and of the world in which they lived. Jeremiah was deeply influenced by Hosea in his thought of the actions of God in the history of the nation. He saw the Mosaic period, the era of the wilderness sojourn, as a period when Israel was faithful to Yahweh; but when Yahweh brought them into Canaan the Israelites turned from him to worship the Canaanite gods. Jeremiah expresses this well in the second chapter:

I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.

• • • • •
What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,

and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?

They did not say, "Where is the Lord

 who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
 who led us in the wilderness,

 in a land of deserts and pits,
 in a land of drought and deep darkness,
 in a land that none passes through,
 where no man dwells?"

And I brought you into a plentiful land
 to enjoy its fruits and its good things.

But when you came in you defiled my land,
 and made my heritage an abomination.

—2:1, 5-7

Jeremiah applied the thought of Yahweh as a God of history especially to the events of the latter part of his life, when Israel was invaded by the Babylonians. In this situation the prophet consistently took a very unpopular position, which eventually led to his imprisonment. His position was that Israel should submit to the yoke of Babylon. He had a basically theological reason for this view, which is given in 27:6. This follows the passage already quoted in which it is stated that Yahweh has created the earth and gives it to whomever he pleases. Jer. 27:6 goes on to say:

Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.

Nebuchadnezzar is the "servant" of Yahweh, not in the sense that he worships Yahweh and consciously seeks to obey

him, but rather in the sense that he is an agent of Yahweh, who even unconsciously must carry out his will. This thought is very similar to Isaiah's statement that the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, was the "rod of [Yahweh's] anger" (Isa. 10:5). God is in control of history, whether men recognize him and his power or not.

God as Love

In addition to being power, Yahweh was also love to Jeremiah. This needs to be emphasized strongly, for the opinion is widespread that the Old Testament does not represent Yahweh as a God of love. This is erroneous.

In the light of all that we have said about God overpowering Jeremiah, almost as if he were a demonic power, it may be surprising for us to say that Jeremiah experienced God as love. Jeremiah does not say anything about Yahweh as expressing love directly to him, but he does speak of Yahweh as expressing love to Israel.

Jeremiah uses two of the figures that Hosea had used to express the love of Yahweh for Israel: Yahweh as husband, and Yahweh as father. The figure of the husband occurs in 2:2, already quoted; the figure of the father is found in 3:19. There are two passages, especially striking, to which we call attention. The first of these is 3:12:

Return, faithless Israel,
 says the Lord.
I will not look on you in anger,
 for I am merciful,
 says the Lord;
I will not be angry for ever.

The word here translated “merciful” in several English versions is the Hebrew *hāsîd* (pronounced *chah-seéd*). It is used frequently of men in the Old Testament, especially in the psalms. In such occurrences it is translated by terms such as godly, holy, saint, and pious. But it is applied to God only twice in the Bible: here, and in Ps. 145:17. In that psalm we read:

The Lord is just in all his ways,
and kind [*hāsîd*] in all his doings.

The English word “merciful” or “kind” does not express the full meaning of the Hebrew word. The Hebrew language has a very rich word, *hésed* (pronounced *chéh-sed*), which occurs 245 times in the Old Testament. In the Revised Standard Version this word is sometimes translated “love” or “steadfast love,” when it is used of God.

The word *hāsîd* is an adjective which describes the activity of one who shows *hésed*, “steadfast love.” A full translation of the line in Jer. 3:12 would then be: “I am one who expresses steadfast love.”

The second passage is Jer. 31:2-3. This comes from a period near the end of the life of Jeremiah. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., Jeremiah chose to remain in Judah rather than go to Babylon, where he might have received kindly treatment. He apparently supported Gedaliah, the governor, in his attempts to restore and build up the land after the devastation of the Babylonians. In 31:2-3, Jeremiah says:

Thus says the Lord:
“The people who survived the sword

found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,
the Lord appeared to him from afar.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness [*hésed*]
to you."

The first part of this refers back to the grace shown Israel in the wilderness, after they had escaped from the sword of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. Jeremiah wishes to assure the Israelites that Yahweh's love and his faithfulness are not temporary, not ephemeral; the love with which he loved Israel then is still available to them, and is the basis of his promise to build them up again.

Jeremiah uses two figures of God which show the vivid reality of God to him. One of them is "the fountain of living waters," found in 2:13. He represents Yahweh as saying:

My people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns,
that can hold no water.

The prophet's figure would have been very meaningful to his hearers. The climate of Palestine is such that its rainfall is not very dependable; the annual rainfall averages now (as it probably has through the centuries) only about twenty-six inches. In ancient times many people had to depend on artificial cisterns to catch and store the rainfall. But cistern water becomes stale, and cisterns sometimes break and lose

their water. But the "living" water of a spring or fountain is always fresh, always dependable and available. Jeremiah says through this figure that Yahweh as a deity is a living, dependable, and ever-available God, whereas the Canaanite deities on which the Israelites are accustomed to depend are like broken cisterns that cannot hold water. We should note, however, that Jeremiah in one of his moods of depression said to God:

Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail?

—15:18

The other figure is that of Yahweh as the potter, found in 18:1-12. Jeremiah did not originate this figure, for it had been used earlier by Isaiah, in 29:16. But Jeremiah elaborates the figure and makes more of it than Isaiah had; and it was frequently used by later writers (Isa. 45:9; 64:8; Wisd. of Sol. 15:7; Eccl. 33:13; Rom. 9:21). Isaiah had used the figure of the potter to express God's activity in creation; Jeremiah uses it to express God's activity in molding the nation Israel according to his own purpose. It is a figure which appropriately combines the concept of the divine sovereignty with that of human freedom; and it teaches the idea of divine patience as well as that of divine sovereignty. The figure of the potter implies that God is a free Person who works with free persons; and that his good purposes for them will ultimately be worked out, even in the face of their own disobedience and intransigence.

Jeremiah has finely summarized his understanding of God's nature in two verses which have the form of a wisdom saying. They are 9:23-24:

Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practice kindness [*hésed*], justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord.”

CHAPTER VIII

MAN AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

JEREMIAH IS FREQUENTLY SAID TO BE THE FATHER OF "individualism" in Hebrew religion—that is, of the type of religion which stresses the importance of the individual man, his responsibility and actions, and his relationship to God, rather than the importance of the nation or some other group. This view is only partly true. There had been emphasis on the individual prior to Jeremiah, and he did not at all neglect the nation in his message.

There had been individualism before Jeremiah. Every prophet was himself a highly individualistic person, and he would often plead with men to turn to God as individuals even if the nation as a whole refused. Early laws, such as those of the Ten Commandments and the Covenant Code (Exod. 20-23), recognized the responsibility of individuals before the law.

Jeremiah was always concerned for the nation and its destiny. Even the famous New Covenant passage, Jer. 31:31-34, which is often called the cornerstone of personal religion, says that the new covenant will be "with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." The individualism we associate with Jeremiah's name is present more by implication than by explicit expression.

The Chosen Nation

Like the prophets before him, Jeremiah believed that Israel was a nation chosen by Yahweh, a covenant people, who enjoyed special privileges and upon whom special responsibilities were laid. He speaks of the nation as "the first fruits of his harvest" (2:3), "a choice vine" which Yahweh had planted (2:21), the "beloved" of Yahweh (11:15; 12:7), and Yahweh's own "heritage" (12:7-9), "vineyard" (12:10), and "flock" (13:17). Jeremiah rarely uses the word "covenant," but the covenant idea underlies his belief concerning the relationship existing between Yahweh and Israel. The reason why Jeremiah did not employ this word often may be that it was abused in the popular religion. In the minds of many of the people, and some of their religious leaders, the covenant may have meant that Yahweh would continue to protect and love Israel in spite of all they might do; they may have even thought that the very existence of Yahweh as a deity was bound up with the existence of the Hebrew people. Jeremiah and other prophets emphasized the obligations which the covenant placed upon Israel. Those obligations called for moral obedience, and for the kind of attitude which is summed up in the word *hésed*—faithfulness, loyalty, devotion, steadfast love (see page 83).

God Demands Moral Obedience

In our study of Jeremiah's view of God, we quoted Jer. 9:23-24 as a summary. There he says that the wise man should understand that *Yahweh* practices kindness [*hésed*], justice, and righteousness, and that he delights in those things. That is another way of saying that *Yahweh* demands

of men that they practice kindness, justice, and righteousness, as he does.

According to Jeremiah and the other pre-exilic prophets, the basic requirements which God makes upon men are in the realm of morality, not in the realm of ceremonialism. The prophets often spoke harshly of the elaborate ritualism they saw practiced in the temples—the piled-up sacrifices, the noisy celebrations, and the elaborate pretenses of piety. Some scholars think the prophets were absolute in their opposition to such practices and really wanted them abolished; others think the prophets believed those practices should be purified of foreign elements, related more directly to the moral life of the people, and the like. Some of the words of the pre-exilic prophets on this subject are very strong; read, for example, Amos 5:21-27; Isa. 1:10-17; Mic. 6:6-8; and passages in the following psalms written under prophetic influence: 40:6-8; 50:7-15; 51:16-17. If the prophets were not absolutely opposed to the ritualistic system, we may say at least that they would have had little interest even in a purified sacrificial system.

The prophets believed that the important demands of God are for moral obedience. This is stressed in passages cited above, particularly Amos 5:24; Isa. 1:16-17; and Mic. 6:8. Jeremiah made this clear when he spoke in Yahweh's name:

In the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you." (7:22-23.)

Read also Jer. 6:20 for the prophet's view on the cult.

Jeremiah's Denunciation of Sin

Jeremiah saw that the Israelites did not always respond to Yahweh's requirement of moral obedience. This led them into sin against God. So Jeremiah denounced the Israelites for their sins, both the sins of social injustice and those of false worship. He does not have as much to say against social injustice as Amos, but he could condemn it vigorously, as in 5:26-29. Like Hosea he directs his denunciation more often against the sins of false worship and infidelity to Yahweh. Jeremiah boldly denounced all classes of the people, the leaders and the led—prophets, priests, rulers, and common people. Even King Jehoiakim was denounced strongly and bitterly, and Jeremiah prophesied for that king a dishonorable death (22:13-19). In one especially bitter denunciation the prophet shows that the religious leaders are false, and the people prefer such leaders rather than true ones:

An appalling and horrible thing
has happened in the land:
the prophets prophesy falsely,
and the priests rule at their direction;
my people love to have it so,
but what will you do when the end comes?

—5:30-31

Jeremiah went beyond the denunciation of sin to attempt to analyze the *cause* of sin. He must have asked himself: If men know the way of the Lord, why do they persist in sinning? He found the answer in the condition of man's "heart": sin arises from "the stubbornness of the heart," a

phrase which occurs often in Jeremiah's book, 7:24; 13:10; 23:17 and others.

The Hebrews considered the heart as the seat of the intellect. The word for "heart," *lēb* or *lebāb*, should often be translated "mind"; an excellent example is Isa. 6:10, where we read of understanding with the heart. Jeremiah frequently indicated his belief that sin originates in the heart of man, with its stubbornness, wickedness, and weakness. The following passages show this emphasis on the heart:

O Jerusalem, wash your heart from wickedness,
that you may be saved.

How long shall your evil thoughts
lodge within you?

—4:14

'The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart. (17:1.)

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately weak;¹
who can understand it?

"I the Lord search the mind
and try the heart,
to give to every man according to his ways,
according to the fruit of this doings."

—17:9

¹ This word is rendered "wicked" in the King James Version, and "corrupt" in the Revised Standard Version. However, the Hebrew *'ānash* should denote weakness or sickness; it is rendered "sick" in the American Translation.

In the light of such passages we might conclude that Jeremiah believed in what we have come to call "the total depravity of man." One saying of his is often cited in support of this view:

Can the Ethiopian change his skin
or the leopard his spots?
Then also can you do good
who are accustomed to do evil.

—13:23

This passage must, however, be read in the light of its context; it does not actually speak of man's natural depravity, but rather of the hardening influence of habit and custom. Through continued willful disobedience, men may become so accustomed to the doing of evil that only by what appears to be a miracle can they be brought to do good.

Several passages in Jeremiah show that he believed in the very opposite of the native depravity of man. He believed that sin and disobedience are *unnatural* rebellion against the goodness of God. The passages are 2:10-11; 5:22-25; 8:7; and 18:13-16. We have already quoted the second and third of these passages (page 79). In 5:22 he contrasts the "stubborn and rebellious heart" of the people with the obedience of the sea to the law laid down for it by Yahweh; in 8:7 he contrasts the people's lack of knowledge of Yahweh's ordinance with the obedience of the birds to the laws set for them.

In 2:10-11 the prophet says:

Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see,
or send to Kedar and examine with care;
see if there has been such a thing.

Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for that which does not profit.

Here the prophet sets the action of Israel over against that of pagan nations. The latter do not change their gods even though, in the opinion of the prophet, they are unreal gods. Yet Israel exchanges Yahweh, who is "their glory," for Baal, a deity who "does not profit." Israel's infidelity to Yahweh is contrary to the natural inclination even of pagans.

A contrast to nature is found in 18:13-16:

Ask among the nations,
who has heard the like of this?
The virgin Israel
has done a very horrible thing.
Does the snow of Lebanon leave
the crags of Sirion? ²
Do the mountain waters run dry,
the cold flowing streams?
But my people have forgotten me,
they burn incense to false gods;
they have stumbled in their ways,
in the ancient roads,
and have gone into bypaths,
not the highway,
making their land a horror,
a thing to be hissed at forever.

² Another name for Mount Hermon in northern Palestine; see Deut. 3:9; Ps. 29:6. This mountain peak, over 9,000 feet above sea level, is usually covered with snow all the year.

Jeremiah's Call for Repentance

Jeremiah proclaimed the message that men ought to obey God and that they are capable of obeying him; it should be a part of their "nature" to be obedient to the God who made them and has prepared the highway on which they should walk. If they do not, the prophet must summon them to repentance.

Hebrew-Jewish religion is often described simply as a religion of "arid legalism," in which salvation depends on scrupulous keeping of the law. It is nearer the truth to say that in both ancient Hebrew religion and in Judaism, salvation was dependent on repentance, rather than on minute and scrupulous keeping of law. It was clearly said in the period immediately after the Old Testament that even sacrifice did not avail unless it was accompanied by repentance. Jeremiah had more to say on repentance than any other prophet, and he is correctly termed "the prophet of repentance" in the Old Testament.

Yet, Jeremiah's emphasis on repentance is somewhat obscured by the terms he used, or rather by our incomplete understanding of them. The Hebrew verb which is usually recognized as meaning "repent" by the dictionaries and English translations is *nāham*. This word means literally to be sorry, and thus to change one's mind or purpose. In reality it is used more often of God than of man, as in Jer. 4:28; 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10. The Hebrews believed that God could "repent" in that he could change his own purposes in the light of man's attitudes and actions. They did not think of God's will as being completely static and inflexible, but as dynamic and responsive.

The word which more often expresses the idea of man's

repenting is the Hebrew word *shûb*, which means literally to turn, either to turn away or to turn back. The figure is derived from that of a traveler on the highway. If he is on the right road, he may wander off and "turn away" from the right road; if he has wandered off, he may "turn back" to the highway. The word is used in the two different meanings in the following:

When men fall, do they not rise again?
If one turns away, does he not return?
—8:4

Jeremiah speaks often of the need for repentance and summons the men of his day to repent. One of the longest and clearest is the following:

If you return, O Israel,
 says the Lord,
to me you should return.
If you remove your abominations from my presence,
 and do not waver,
and if you swear, "As the Lord lives,"
 in truth, in justice, and in uprightness,
then nations shall bless themselves in him,
 and in him shall they glory
.

Break up your fallow ground,
 and sow not among thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the Lord,
 remove the foreskin of your hearts,
O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem;
lest my wrath go forth like fire,

and burn with none to quench it,
because of the evil of your doings.

—4:1-4

Read also 3:12-14; 18:11; 31:18-19. Jeremiah describes superficial and inadequate repentance in 3:1-5. On occasion the prophet felt that he heard the call of God to himself to repent:

If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.

—15:19

Jeremiah believed that repentance should be genuine and revolutionary. True repentance would include several things: recognition of the fact that one had sinned against God, and humble confession of sin before him (see 3:22-25 and 14:7-9, 20-22 as samples of what confession might include); a feeling of shame over one's rebellion; a *turning away from* sin, including idolatry, social injustice, dependence on ritual, and all of those things which arise from "stubbornness of the heart"; and a *turning toward* Yahweh and his ways, with a new resolve to obey and follow him. Jeremiah continually said, "Amend [or improve] your ways and your doings" (7:3, 5; 18:11; 26:13), and that was involved in repentance. Jeremiah virtually said, as did John the Baptist later, "Bear fruit that befits repentance" (Matt. 3:8). Repentance meant change in conduct and character, and in one's attitude toward God and one's own life.

Jeremiah believed that in repentance many men could turn to God and overcome the inclinations of the evil heart. Yet he must have seen that with many men the stubbornness

of the heart was so great they would not repent. The logical development of his view is that man needs a new heart, and such was proclaimed by Ezekiel (18:31; 36:26). Jeremiah did not proclaim the need for a new heart, but we shall see that in his concept of the New Covenant he came close to the view which is found in Ezekiel and in the New Testament doctrine of regeneration (John 3:3).

CHAPTER IX

JEREMIAH'S HOPE

AT THE END OF HIS GREAT CHAPTER ON CHRISTIAN LOVE, Paul lists three things which endure: faith, hope, and love (I Cor. 13:13). While he says that love is the greatest of these, we must remember that one of the characteristics of love is that it "hopes all things" (vs. 7).

Everyone needs and lives by hope, whether he is Christian or not. Hope gives us the conviction that the future will in some measure bring the fulfillment of our dreams and ambitions and see the fruition of some of our plans. For the Christian it means having faith that God will fulfill his promises. We can realize the central necessity for hope if we contemplate the tragic plight of a person of whom it can be said, "He has lost hope." Whether the statement applies to hope about some specific matter, such as recovery of health or receiving information about a lost relative, or hope concerning life in general, it is a heart-rending statement to make. We can easily reverse the popular proverb and say, "Where there is hope, there is life."

However, hope is not a word we customarily associate with the life of Jeremiah. His name has come into the English language in the word "Jeremiad," which is defined as "a doleful story" or "a dolorous tirade." Pessimism and cynicism are often associated with this prophet. Yet hope was in reality

a very strong ingredient of his nature and message. His hope was not based upon shallow and facile optimism, as was that of his contemporaries, the false prophets whom he denounced; it was based rather upon a realistic appraisal of the situation in which his nation found itself, and a realistic faith in God and man.

Jeremiah's hope rested ultimately on two factors: his faith in the goodness of God's ultimate purposes, and his confidence in the possibility of man's repentance.

In the last chapter we saw that Jeremiah continually summoned his fellow men to repentance. There must have been times when he felt very discouraged about the possibility of their actually repenting (see 13:23, quoted on page 92); yet it is not likely that he ever withdrew the invitation to repentance or came to believe that repentance was utterly impossible. Words calling for repentance occur throughout his book, and even toward the end of his life Jeremiah was acting as if he believed the people could turn to God. He believed that God was always ready to forgive penitent men.

Faith in God's Purpose

The second ground of his hope was his belief that God's ultimate purpose for his chosen people Israel was good and not evil. God might use various means to bring about his ultimate purpose, means which would seem at the time to be evil; yet in the end God would accomplish his purpose of good.

In the chapter containing the letter to the exiles, we read: "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (29:11).

This view is dramatically presented in the acted parable of the potter in ch. 18. Jeremiah says that he went down to a potter's workshop and there observed a potter working at his wheel. Whenever a vessel he was making of clay became spoiled, the potter would then rework it into another vessel "as it seemed good to the potter to do" (18:4). Jeremiah then received the word of the Lord: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?" says the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." (18:5-6.) As we think about this figure, we are not justified in thinking that a potter consciously plans and seeks to work out a vessel that is ugly or unfit for use. He plans vessels that are useful and attractive in shape and appearance. If something in the clay or in his technique momentarily defeats his purpose, he does not throw away the clay, but he begins again and continues working until he produces a vessel that seems "good" to him. So it is with God's purpose, in the thought of Jeremiah. God may seem to be defeated; his actions may at times bring suffering upon men; but in the end he will make of Israel, his chosen people, a vessel of honor.

We have been thinking about the grounds for Jeremiah's hope. Let us now see his hope in action. There are two incidents in his life, and two passages in his book, which show the prophet's hope in action.

Purchase of the Anathoth Field

The first of these is his purchase of a field at Anathoth while he was in prison, as reported in ch. 32. Jeremiah had been imprisoned on a false charge. A short while after the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem began, the Egyptians sent a

force to help the Judeans, and the Babylonians lifted the siege. During this interval Jeremiah started to leave the city; when he reached the Benjamin Gate he was stopped by a sentry, who accused him of deserting to the enemy. This was a very natural charge. Jeremiah had been advising his fellow Jews to go over to the Babylonians, and the sentry must have thought he was only following his own advice. Jeremiah denied the charge of desertion, for that was not his intention. Nevertheless he was arrested, and after being beaten was placed in prison. At first his place of imprisonment was a private home, but later he was moved to a guard court of the royal palace. The Babylonians subsequently returned to besiege Jerusalem again.

While imprisoned in the guard court, Jeremiah received the word of the Lord telling him that a cousin would come and give him the privilege of redeeming by purchase a field in Anathoth that belonged to the cousin. Jeremiah did so. In his place of imprisonment Jeremiah carried out the legal transaction in every detail: he signed and sealed a deed of purchase, secured witnesses, and paid over the money. He had two copies of the deed made and placed them in an earthenware vessel, so that they might last a long time. Then he said: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." (32:15.)

This is a very significant action, showing us Jeremiah's hope for the future very clearly. Try to imagine the situation. The Babylonians are surrounding the city of Jerusalem; Jeremiah has said on several occasions that they will succeed in capturing the city. He himself is in prison, placed there by his enemies on a false charge. Yet, he is not complaining of

his personal lot, nor of the lot of his country. He is not gloomy and melancholy. He redeems some land belonging to a cousin, so that it may remain in the family, and he declares in unmistakable terms: the time is coming when houses and fields and vineyards will be bought and sold in this land. The land of Judah has a future; the people of Judah have a future. There is no time for despondency, but only for hope and faith.

A parallel to this action in the history of Rome has been pointed out. Livy says that when Hannibal was camping against Rome, a captured prisoner told him that the very land on which Hannibal's camp stood had just been sold, without a reduction in the price. Some Romans believed in the future of their city, and were willing to show it in a financial way, just as Jeremiah believed in the future of Jerusalem—in spite of all the reasons for loss of hope—and was willing to show it by a financial transaction.

Jeremiah Remains with His People

The second incident occurred at the time of the fall of Jerusalem. The book of Jeremiah gives two slightly differing accounts of the fate of Jeremiah at the time Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. According to one, when Jerusalem was taken, a group of Babylonian officials sent and released Jeremiah from the court of the guard. Then they entrusted him to Gedaliah, who was appointed governor of Judah, that he should take him home. Then the biblical account says: "So he dwelt among the people" (39:3, 14).

The other account says that Jeremiah was bound with chains and was being carried off to Babylon with a group of Jewish captives, when the Babylonian captain of the guard

discovered him at the town of Ramah, north of Jerusalem. The captain of the guard said to Jeremiah:

Now, behold, I release you today from the chains on your hands. If it seems good to you to come with me to Babylon, come, and I will look after you well; but if it seems wrong to you to come with me to Babylon, do not come. See, the whole land is before you; go wherever you think it good and right to go.

The prophet turned down the offer of a special treatment in Babylon, but went to Gedaliah and "dwelt with him among the people who were left in the land" (40:6).

It is likely that the first of these two accounts is entirely accurate and that the second includes some legendary elements. Both agree in one thing: Jeremiah remained in Palestine with his own people. We may be sure that, even if the prophet was offered safe conduct to Babylon and a life of ease there, he chose to stay with his own people. He would have made such a choice not only because of his intense devotion to them, but because he believed in their future in their own land. Even in the dark hour of the fall of Jerusalem he had hope for the future.

Hope Under Gedaliah

We have little information about Jeremiah's activity during the brief time that Gedaliah was governor of Judah before he was assassinated. Ch. 31 contains a number of verses that probably come from this period. They are more appropriate to this time than any other. They show the hope of the prophet, as well as the basis on which it was built. Speaking in God's name the prophet says:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel!
Again you shall adorn yourself with timbrels,
and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.
Again you shall plant vineyards
upon the mountains of Samaria;
the planters shall plant,
and shall enjoy the fruit.
For there shall be a day when watchmen will call
in the hill country of Ephraim:
"Arise, and let us go up to Zion,
to the Lord our God."

—31:3-6

Thus says the Lord:
Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;
for your work shall be rewarded,
says the Lord,
and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.
There is hope for your future,
says the Lord,
and your children shall come back to their own country.
I have heard Ephraim bemoaning,
"Thou hast chastened me, and I was chastened,
like an untrained calf;
bring me back that I may be restored,
for thou art the Lord my God.
For after I had turned away I repented;
and after I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh;
I was ashamed, and I was confounded,
because I bore the disgrace of my youth."

Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he my darling child?
For as often as I speak against him,
I do remember him still.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
says the Lord.

—31:16-20

Here we see the grounds of Jeremiah's hope clearly presented: the love and mercy of God on the one hand, and the repentance of the people on the other. We see too that Jeremiah, in characteristic Hebrew fashion, thinks of the future in terms of renewal of life and of joy on this earth, with the people in their own land, not in some transcendental life beyond this life and beyond history as we know it.

The Promise of a New Covenant

The New Covenant passage (31:31-34) is the best-known section in the whole book of Jeremiah. It is quoted in the New Testament, and it forms the verbal basis of the division of our Bible into Old and New Testaments (or Covenants) and of all of the ideas centering around the old covenant with Israel and the new covenant of Christianity. The passage in its entirety is as follows:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my

law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (31:31-34.)

This passage does not speak of the giving of a new law. The law of Sinai, laying down the fundamental moral requirements of God, was sufficient. But it is not enough for the law to be written on stones; it must be written on the hearts of men. This implies that men must have a new motivation and a new power to keep the law and obey the Lord. Is it not true that in most matters—whether personal or social—we know what we ought to do, when we are honest with ourselves, but our real problems are problems of motivation—how can we get others and ourselves to do that which we know is right and best? We need the power and motivation to obey God's will as we know it.

In this passage the new covenant is to be made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Jeremiah and his disciples did not wholly overcome the nationalistic point of view, and the sense of national solidarity and pride. But in the new covenant the law must be written on the hearts of individual men. This is close to Ezekiel's teaching about the need for a "new heart," which men get for themselves or which God gives to them, and close to the Johannine teaching about regeneration (see page 91).

We do no injustice to Jeremiah if we say that he first enunciated, without realizing it, what has come to be a central principle of Protestantism. Every man is his own priest,

and every man is his own prophet. When the new covenant is realized, every man knows God without the need of intermediary. For the prophets, knowing God was very important. This did not mean simply an intellectual knowledge of God's existence and nature; it meant knowing and understanding God's moral requirements and having the will and ability to obey him. But there is recognition of the fact that perfection cannot be expected of men. The new covenant promises not sinlessness, but forgiveness: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Jeremiah's hope was not the same as our fully developed Christian hope. The Christian hope has a dimension which his did not have. He could look forward only to new life on this earth and in the history of our earth. Life in the Hebrew Sheol was not something to be sought after. Our Christian faith gives us hope in this life on this earth, but it has a dimension of a life beyond the grave and fulfillment beyond history. Yet Jeremiah's hope had the same grounds as ours: confidence in the possibilities inherent within men, and faith in the goodness, righteousness, and power of God.

CHAPTER X

PERMANENT VALUES IN JEREMIAH'S LIFE AND MESSAGE

WE HAVE SURVEYED THE LIFE AND MESSAGE OF JEREMIAH, considering him as primarily a spokesman of God to the people of his own day. He dealt with important problems in times that were of crucial significance for his nation. His attitude and message helped the Jewish people to survive the disaster of the Babylonian exile. Though he often seemed to be only "a voice crying in the wilderness," with no one to heed, he did have influence, and in the course of time he gained in stature in the estimation of his people. Centuries later, when Jesus asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" they answered, "Some say . . . Jeremiah . . ." (Matt. 16:14).

This prophet has a message for us, if we are willing to listen to him. There were defects in his character, and some aspects of his thought and message may strike us today as trivial or erroneous. But he dealt with problems that are of perennial significance and sought to bring the will of the eternal God to bear upon them. Because our own problems are similar, and we are human beings who need to know the will of God, we can learn from Jeremiah.

In seeking to assess the permanent values in this prophet, we must remember that his life and message are bound

closely together, perhaps more so than with any other prophet. His own life and spiritual experience constitute his most eloquent message; yet the goal and end of his living was to deliver the message given him as a spokesman for God.

The Nature of God's Servant

The fact that this man was a prophet of God is of great significance in itself. In our study of the personality of Jeremiah, we have seen that he was at times an unwilling, or even rebellious, prophet. He did not want to prophesy, and his prophetic career brought him pain and suffering. He cried out in agony against God, even seeming to shake his fist at the One who made him a prophet. Yet he never lacked the energy and courage to prophesy, and he was a faithful prophet in spite of his suffering and rebellion.

God does not ask that his prophets be perfect men, nor that they be mechanical puppets. He expects them to be real men who dedicate their wills to him. Those who are capable of great despair and defiance, as Jeremiah was, are also capable of intense devotion. Those who are sensitive to personal slights and injustices may be most deeply sensitive to the evils of society. God wants the devotion of real men living among real people, if they are to be spokesmen for the living God and his faithful servants.

True Prayer as Dialogue

The prayer life of Jeremiah has a lesson to teach us. He has been called "the father of true prayer." His "Confessions" contain a number of prayers addressed to God, and in some cases the response received by the prophet is given (see page 61). In them we see what true prayer should be: dialogue

with God, in which man frankly and openly bares his soul to God and waits for God's reply. Jeremiah's prayers were in no sense formal or perfunctory; they were the outpourings of his deepest thoughts and feelings, and he waited for God's answer. Though the answer was often not what Jeremiah expected, he did receive strength to continue his prophetic task.

The author of the dialogue of the book of Job was influenced by Jeremiah. He depicts Job as one who openly and frankly pours out his soul to God, and at times even shakes his fist at God as Jeremiah had done (see, for example, Job 7:11-21; 9:25-10:22; 19:5-22). Job was by no means a paragon of patience as we often think. In the end Job was rebuked by Yahweh (Job 38:2 ff.), but it was Job rather than the friends who received a new vision of God (Job 42:5), and whose prayer was accepted by God (Job 42:7-9).

The Nature of True Religion

Jeremiah's experiences and messages are at one in emphasizing the nature of true religion: it must be internal, spiritual, and personal. His own religious experience was intensely personal, with an intimate relationship to God not surpassed by other prophets.

In many ways Jeremiah emphasized that the proper worship and service of God cannot be merely external or formal. It is not dependent upon the temple and its sacrificial offerings (7:1-15, 21-26), nor upon residence in the Judean homeland (29:4-14), nor upon rites such as circumcision (9:25-26). The Deity who examines and knows the heart of man will be found by the one who seeks him with his whole heart. Inasmuch as sin arises from "stubbornness of the evil

heart," God promises that, when he makes a new covenant with men, he will write the law upon their heart.

For Jeremiah true religion was fellowship with God, or "knowledge of God," as he would have put it, through prayer and through moral obedience to God's Word. In recognizing that religion is personal, he did not neglect the social aspects of religion. God demands social justice. Jeremiah's religion never became a completely personal mystical relationship with God, for he was too deeply conscious of the gulf that separates man and God, and no Hebrew prophet could think of himself as being absorbed in the divine. Yet man may have fellowship with God through obedience and prayer.

God as Power and Love

From Jeremiah we can learn that God is both sovereign power and forgiving love. As a Hebrew, Jeremiah inherited the belief that Yahweh was a God of great power and authority. Sometimes Yahweh had been represented as a deity who exerted his power in arbitrary and irrational ways. Indeed Jeremiah seemed at times to experience the "demonic" power of God (15:18; 20:7). However, this was not the final word for Jeremiah. He had learned from Hosea, and others who preceded him, to represent Yahweh as being like a husband or like a father. Yahweh is *hāsîd*—merciful, gracious, showing steadfast love to those who are in covenant with him (3:12; see pages 82-83). He stands always ready to forgive those who come to him in repentance.

We are accustomed to believing that God is love, on the basis of the New Testament. Yet we are often inclined to believe that the God of the Old Testament was different: He was wrathful, vengeful, at best demanding only justice and

not manifesting love. Such a view is not true to the real view of the Old Testament, as one can see by reading carefully not only Jeremiah, but also Hosea, many psalms, and indeed the whole history of Hebrew religion.

The same God who is creator and sustainer of the universe and nature (the God of power) is also redeeming and forgiving love. Jeremiah does not state this as eloquently and clearly as it is stated elsewhere—in the words of Second Isaiah, for example—but he believed it and experienced in his own life the forgiving love of God.

God in History

Jeremiah believed that Yahweh was the God who exerted his power in history as well as in nature. This faith was so important for the Hebrews in general, and Jeremiah in particular, that it is worth devoting a separate section to it.

Jeremiah saw the hand of Yahweh working in that part of history which was "the past" for him: in the exodus from Egypt, in the entrance into Canaan, and in the years which the Hebrews had spent in their own land. Yet he saw the hand of God working likewise in that which was to him "contemporary history." He believed God had a will regarding the relationship between Israel and Babylonia, and regarding the course of events in the prophet's own times. He served as God's spokesman to convey to Israel's leaders the nature of that will as he understood it.

In our own day it is not difficult to believe in the power of God in nature, because of the marvelous discoveries of science. It seems to be easier to believe that there is a Mind at the heart of our universe than that all is due only to a great accident, or a series of accidents. Yet it is often difficult

to see the hand of God in the history of our own times, because so much seems to be senseless and without purpose. Is the history of our time leading only to cosmic catastrophe in atomic warfare?

We can learn from Jeremiah that God's working in history is not that of an arbitrary despot, and not that of a deity imposing his will—however beneficent it may be—upon men. The will of God is not static and completely fixed, but dynamic and responsive to the needs and even the wills of men. History is the result of the interrelations of God's will and men's choices. Jeremiah could say that God "repented"—that is, that he changed his purpose and mind in response to the actions of men. Yet he believed that in the end the good purposes of God could not be frustrated or defeated. Cannot our view of God's providence learn much in this respect from Jeremiah?

Man's Nature and Possibilities

Because Jeremiah is so often considered to be a pessimist, his view of man's nature has been considered to be pessimistic. It is actually realistic, however, and ultimately very hopeful.

Jeremiah believed that man should and indeed *can* serve and obey God, whose deepest demand is for moral obedience rather than ritualistic observance. Man is not naturally depraved; it should be a part of his nature to serve in gratitude the God who made him. Nevertheless, Jeremiah observed realistically that man often does not obey God, but wanders away from him in sin. Jeremiah attributed this to "stubbornness of the evil heart," which is derived from custom and habit rather than from natural depravity.

The path of salvation for man is "repentance." We have seen that Jeremiah said more about repentance than did any other prophet, and that for him repentance was a very profound and thoroughgoing experience. He challenged his nation, and the individuals within it, to repent and return to God.

In an age which is inclined to be pessimistic regarding the nature of man, we can learn from Jeremiah to be realistic, neither rising to heights of foolish optimism nor descending to the depths of despair. God made man for moral obedience, giving him freedom of the will that he might choose to obey or disobey; man has within his nature not only an inclination toward evil, but also an instinct for God. He should be vividly aware of the hardening influence of habit upon his life, but also conscious that the path of repentance is always open to him.

The Basis of Genuine Hope

From Jeremiah we may learn that genuine hope must be based on realistic appraisal of the situation in which men find themselves, faith in the purposes of God, and confidence in the ability of men to obey God.

Jeremiah was, like Isaiah and some of his other predecessors, a "statesman-prophet." He was called on by kings to express the will of God regarding practical political affairs. His counsel was not often heeded, and he was perhaps considered a visionary. The fall of Jerusalem and other events proved that Jeremiah was not as far wrong as the "practical" men who opposed his policies. Jeremiah had a clearer vision, and was more realistic in his view of the political realities, than the leaders who brought the nation to ruin.

Yet the prophet would never have thought that his counsel was prompted by purely practical considerations. He was above all an interpreter of God's will for the nation, and if he counseled submission to Babylonia, it was because he believed the Babylonian king was Yahweh's servant. His faith in God, and in God's ultimate purpose, was deeper than that of the shallow men around him.

Is it not often true that the so-called "practical men" are anything but truly practical, because their vision is narrow and selfish, and their faith in God superficial? Those who are accused of being ivory-towered visionaries may in the long run prove to be the more practical.

Hope that is not ephemeral and illusory must be based upon the same kind of clear-eyed participation in life, and deep faith in God and man, which Jeremiah had. Such hope is not finally disappointed.

APPENDIX I

SUGGESTED CHRONOLOGICAL ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

- I. INAUGURAL VISIONS (late in reign of Josiah, 640-609 B.C., or early in reign of Jehoiakim)
 - A. Call of Jeremiah, 1:4-10
 - B. Vision of the almond rod, 1:11-12
 - C. Vision of the boiling pot, 1:13-19
- II. REIGN OF JEHOIAKIM (609-598 B.C.)
 - A. Lament over King Jehoahaz, 22:10-12
 - B. The temple sermon, 7:1-15; 26:1-24
 - C. Early messages, 2:1-37; 3:1-5, 12-14a, 19-25; 4:1-8, 11-22, 27-31; 5:1-17, 20-31; 6:1-30; 7:16-9:1
 - D. Message against Egypt (605 B.C.), 46:2-12
 - E. Dictation of the two scrolls (604 B.C.), ch. 36
 - F. Messages against Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Damascus (604 B.C. and later), 47:1-49:27 (in part)
 - G. "Confessions" of Jeremiah, 10:23-24; 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:9-10, 14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-12, 14-18 (cf. 16:1-13)
 - H. Laments at the invasion in 601 B.C., 9:10-11, 17-22; 12:7-13
 - I. Use of the Rechabites as an object lesson, ch. 35
 - J. Second arrest of Jeremiah, 19:1-2a, 10-11a, 14-15; 20:1-6
 - K. Concerning false prophets, 23:9-33
 - L. Second message against Egypt (601 B.C.), 46:13-26
 - M. Message against Kedar and kingdoms of Hazor (599-598 B.C.), 49:28-33
 - N. Warnings concerning the Babylonians, 13:1-11, 20-27; 17:1-4; 22:6-7; 25:1-13
 - O. Condemnation of Jehoiakim, 22:13-19

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- P. Messages of uncertain date, probably from this reign, 9:2-9, 25-26; 11:15-16; 18:1-6, 13-17; 21:11-14

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